Coexistence in Public Space

Engagement tools for creating shared spaces in places with homelessness

SPUR   Gehl

spur.org/coexistence

The public engagement tools described in this report can be found at spur.org/coexistence

Acknowledgments

Contents

Public Space, Equity and Coexistence

In recent years the number of people experiencing homelessness has grown rapidly in many American cities, raising new questions about who public space is designed for. As more and more Bay Area residents find themselves without homes, many have defaulted to living in public spaces such as parks, plazas and squares. These spaces were not designed to be homes, however, and housed users voice concerns that the presence of unhoused residents degrades public spaces, rendering them unwelcoming or even unsafe.

At the same time, people who do not have access to stable housing are members of the community and should not be denied the use of public space simply because of their living situation. As long as our cities do not provide housing for all who need it, our neighborhoods will continue to face the challenge of how housed and unhoused users can coexist in public space.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement have put increased attention on the use and design of public space. Social distancing mandates have created greater demand for shared outdoor spaces, and police shootings of Black Americans in public places pose a threat to safety and belonging for communities of color. Increasingly, voices in the planning and design community are challenging accepted notions of how public space is designed — and for whom — throwing long-held "best practices" into question. A majority of the public spaces in American cities were designed by generations of predominantly white male professionals.[1] These designers worked from their personal experiences and assumptions, and often created spaces that prioritized one type of user: a white able-bodied man. Over time, the rules and norms that developed within these spaces further prioritized and accommodated this white male user at the expense of others. In the words of Isis Ferguson, associate director of city and community strategy at Place Lab, "Black and brown bodies gathering in public space routinely reads as suspect, criminal or illegitimate. Peoples' rights to convene or congregate becomes interrupted, sometimes . . . through limitation, denied access and force." Ferguson points out that elements that create feelings of safety for some — such as security cameras and police presence — are experienced by others as "another dimension of state violence."[2]

When the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread Black Lives Matter protests unfolded in early 2020, SPUR was in the midst of a long-term research project on San José's largest urban green space, Guadalupe River Park. A key focus of this research was to identify new possibilities for how the park could better serve and connect San José residents, bridging socioeconomic and racial divides through a shared public space. Exploring this idea in the context of the larger national dialogue, we began to examine the principles and values that allow a public space to be truly equitable. Through a partnership with the urban design firm Gehl and a number of local stakeholders, we began exploring how to best facilitate community dialogue about the key challenges that housed park users experience when visiting Guadalupe River Park, specifically homelessness and safety. What behaviors and conditions make people feel unsafe, threatened or uncomfortable in public spaces? How might we design and program spaces to not only accommodate a variety of users but provide necessary resources and services to support those living in public spaces?

Through this learning journey, it became clear that the goal we wished to achieve in Guadalupe River Park was one of coexistence — designing and managing spaces to allow for people of all backgrounds to find joy and

belonging within a shared space while feeling safe and secure. SPUR and Gehl created the Coexistence Toolkit, a set of public engagement exercises for city agencies, nonprofit organizations and other park stewards to use in public meetings and events that inform public space projects, master planning efforts and visioning sessions. This report introduces the toolkit, which can be downloaded at **spur.org/coexistence**, and offers considerations for community discussion. We used Guadalupe River Park as a case study for testing these ideas, but we maintained flexibility in developing the exercises so that other cities and communities could tailor them to respond to their own needs and challenges.

We hope this research provides the foundation for a new way of thinking about park equity and helps facilitate a new way of holding conversations about access, safety and design within shared public space.

The Systemic Causes of Homelessness

It's important to note that the Coexistence Toolkit is an effort to address the *symptoms* of homelessness; it does not address its systemic causes. This report focuses on how to protect and manage equal access to public space in the current reality, where homelessness exists. However, it should not be taken as a sign of complacency or resignation regarding homelessness in our communities. The Bay Area must continue working to end homelessness by addressing its root causes. SPUR's housing and economic justice policy programs target these structural forces.

The underlying forces that cause homelessness are deeply rooted in housing, economic and racial inequity. For San José, one of the largest contributing factors leading to homelessness is income inequality and the growing wealth gap. San José ranked sixth in the nation in terms of income inequality according to a 2018 Brookings Institution report.[11] The city's highest earners make 10.5 times more than its lowest earners. Between 2014 and 2016, salaries of high earners increased by more than $60,000 while salaries of low earners increased less than $2,000. Until we as a society address these larger issues, we will not be able to properly address or solve our homelessness crisis.

Homelessness is just the tip of the iceberg — a symptom of broader economic and social forces and experiences.

Illustration by Gehl
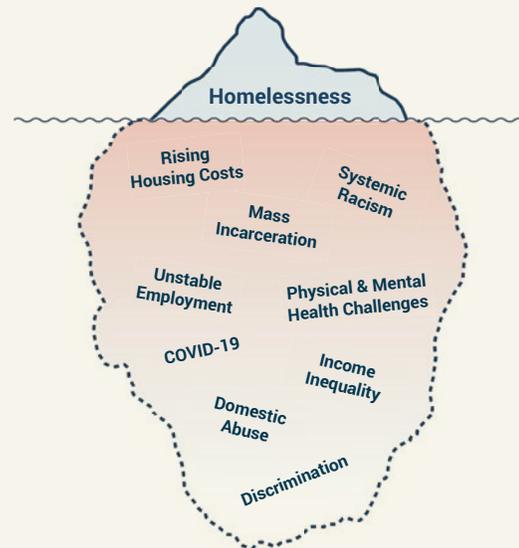
Homelessness and Guadalupe River Park

The downtown portion of the Guadalupe River Trail passes underneath multiple highway interchanges, which reduce natural light and visibility from the street.

In 2019, with funding from the Knight Foundation, SPUR launched a long-term planning and research initiative to better understand the current conditions and challenges of Guadalupe River Park and to help create a road map for future investment in and enhancement of downtown San José's signature public space. The river park is a three-mile linear public space that runs parallel to the banks of the Guadalupe River through the heart of downtown San José, from Highway 880 at the north to Highway 280 at the south. It holds significant ecological value and is home to many wildlife species, including the Chinook salmon, rainbow trout, great blue heron and California beaver.[3] Its key feature is a trail that weaves through several residential neighborhoods and commercial districts in the greater downtown area.

However, the river park faces challenges because of how the trail is tucked away and at times almost hidden by freeway overpasses and overgrown shrubs and trees, causing low visibility. In addition, the different sections of the park and trail are not seamlessly connected. The downtown portion is choppy, often abutting large street intersections that make it challenging for users to identify connection points and continue on. Large highway interchanges hover above, reducing light and visibility. These structural issues make it awkward for people to visit and use the park, but the larger barriers are maintenance, stewardship and the fact that most of the green

Photo by Kara Brodgesell

spaces are natural areas that lack opportunities for activity and recreation.

In spite of the park's current challenges, the space is a popular destination for runners, cyclists and families who find joy stumbling upon its hidden gems, like beautiful murals or native birds resting in the trees.

The park also skirts the edge of some of the largest planned developments San José has seen in more than a decade, including Downtown West, Google's proposed mixed-use campus, and the expansion of Diridon Station, which will make it the biggest transportation hub west of the Mississippi River. When these developments are completed, the river park will serve as a necessary green space for thousands of new residents and workers.

Understanding the trends and forces at play, SPUR focused its research on three main objectives:

→ Balancing natural ecology with a rapidly growing urban environment
→ Measuring and communicating the economic benefits of an enhanced Guadalupe River Park
→ Demonstrating that public space is a driver for creating more engaged, equitable and sustainable communities

Throughout the early stages of our research, including more than 50 interviews and meetings with residents, nonprofit groups, developers and service providers, we learned that two of the major tensions playing out in the park — ones that would impact all of our research efforts — were safety and maintenance. When we began to unpack what "safety" meant to the interviewees, we found that it was largely connected with people's perceptions of and experiences with unhoused residents living in and using the park. Other safety concerns included poor lighting, low visibility and fragmentation of the trail, but often we heard that the park would never be an inviting and active place unless its managers reduced the presence of unhoused people and homeless encampments. This is further supported by annual surveys conducted by the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy. In a 2019 survey, only 23% of respondents felt welcome and safe using the park trail, and 43% cited concerns regarding unhoused people in the open-ended response section of the survey.

Photo by Kara Brodgesell

FIGURE 1

Planned Development Along Guadalupe River Park

Guadalupe River Park passes by a number of large planned developments. When they're completed, the river park will serve thousands of new residents and workers.
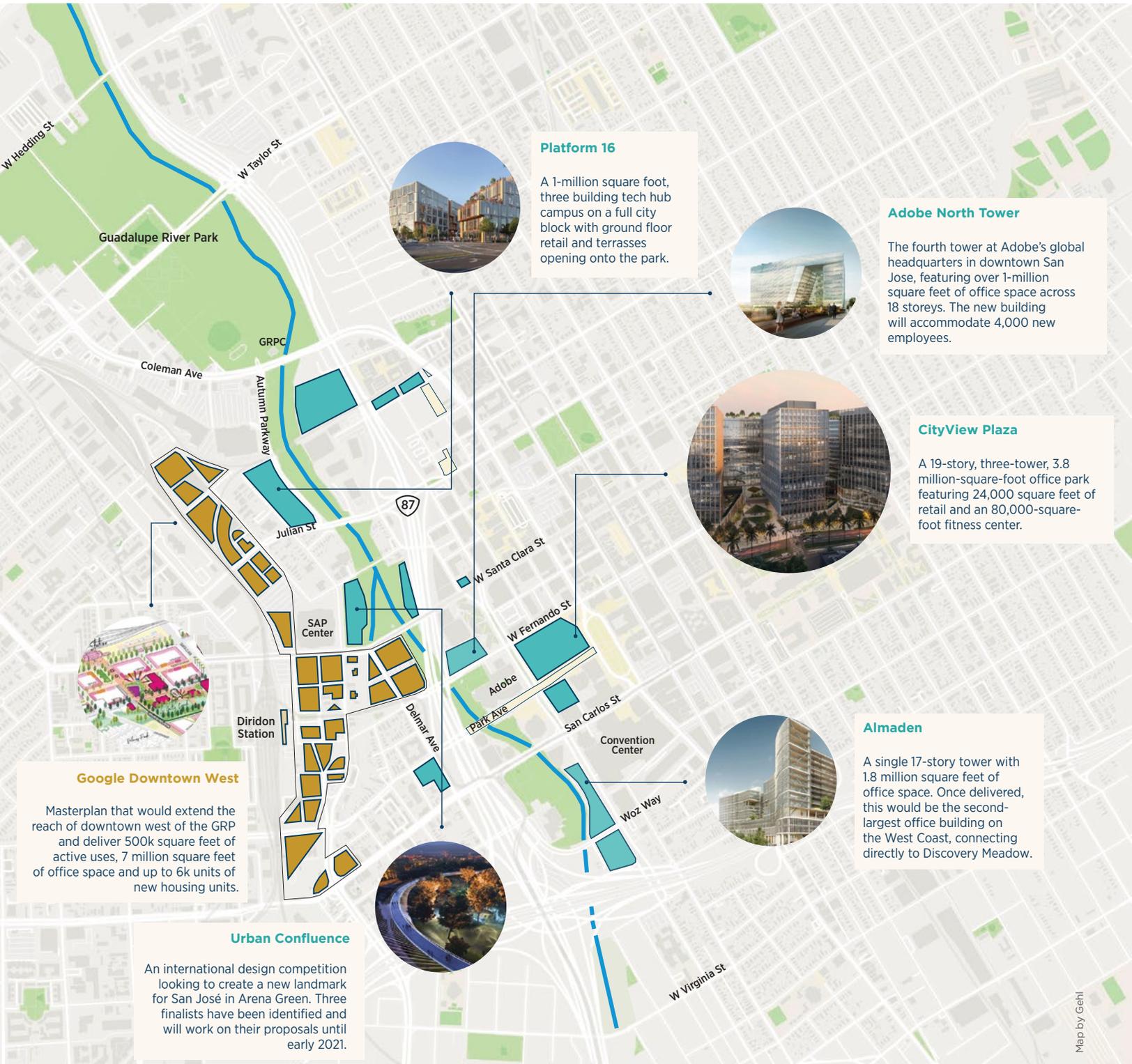
Platform 16

A 1-million square foot, three building tech hub campus on a full city block with ground floor retail and terrasses opening onto the park.

Adobe North Tower

The fourth tower at Adobe's global headquarters in downtown San Jose, featuring over 1-million square feet of office space across 18 storeys. The new building will accommodate 4,000 new employees.

CityView Plaza

A 19-story, three-tower, 3.8 million-square-foot office park featuring 24,000 square feet of retail and an 80,000-square-foot fitness center.

Almaden

A single 17-story tower with 1.8 million square feet of office space. Once delivered, this would be the second-largest office building on the West Coast, connecting directly to Discovery Meadow.

Google Downtown West

Masterplan that would extend the reach of downtown west of the GRP and deliver 500k square feet of active uses, 7 million square feet of office space and up to 6k units of new housing units.

Urban Confluence

An international design competition looking to create a new landmark for San José in Arena Green. Three finalists have been identified and will work on their proposals until early 2021.

Map by Gehl

Safety and perceptions of people experiencing homelessness are not concerns restricted to Guadalupe River Park or San José. The National Recreation and Parks Association has identified addressing homelessness in public space as a key priority.[4] Through community interviews, the parks association found that what often upset housed park users and drove them to voice concern to park management was not interactions with unhoused park users but rather symptoms of homelessness, such as trash and encampments. Complaints included requests to remove public restrooms, benches and overgrown vegetation, which some visitors felt attracted people experiencing homelessness. The parks association also indicated that, given the diversity and complexity of park uses, park managers are now having to do jobs they are not prepared for. Park staff are not just public space stewards and environmental educators but social workers, mental health counselors and much more. Parks and recreation agencies must now balance providing services and resources for unhoused people with enforcing park rules and maintenance standards.[5]

Trash and debris throughout the park and especially along riverbanks has led to increased water toxicity and pollution.

A man bathes in the Guadalupe River.


Photos by Kara Brodgesell

San José has seen a sharp increase in homelessness, in step with rising housing costs, leading to an outsized impact on people of color and a large unsheltered population. In its 2019 Homeless Census, the city found that the number of homeless adults had drastically increased to 6,097, an increase of 1,747 from 2017.[6] Guadalupe River Park has become a popular place for people to find temporary shelter. The river provides a space for bathing and washing of personal items, and the overgrown vegetation and large swaths of relatively open and unused land provide space away from large groups of people and businesses.

FIGURE 2
Homelessness in San José
San José has seen a sharp increase in homelessness, in step with rising housing costs — leading to an outsized impact on the marginalized and a large unsheltered population.

Rise in San José Home Values

$1.1M

$100,000,000

$800,000

$600,000

$400,000

2011   2013   2015   2017   2019

Rise in San José Homeless Population

The biggest misconception we face is that homelessness is not caused by housing challenges.
Tomiquia Moss
Founder & Chief Executive
All Home

6,097

6,000

5,000

4,000

2011   2013   2015   2017   2019
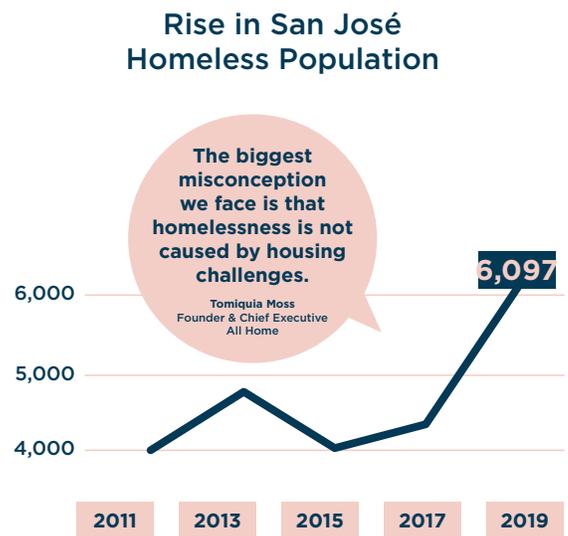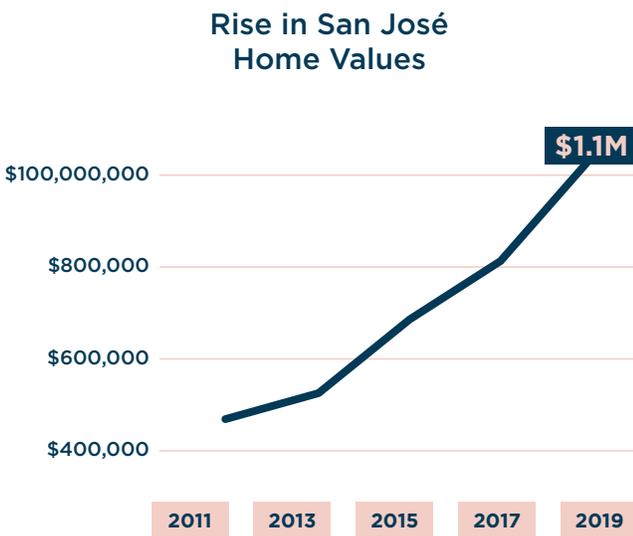
Share of Latinx, Black, and Native American Population (Homeless vs. San José Overall)

32%
42%

SAN JOSE POP.
HOMELESS POP.

3%
19%

1%
9%

Latinx   Black   Native American
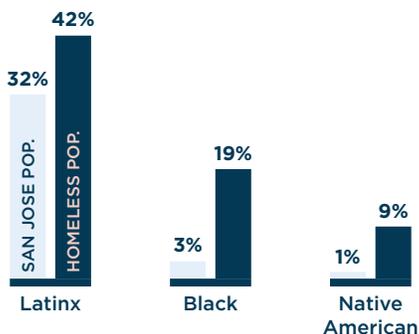
Where the San José Homeless Population Lives
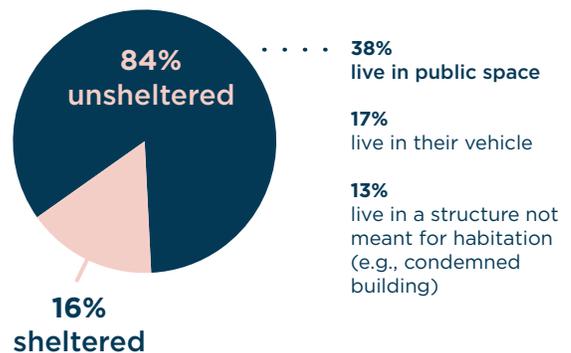
84% unsheltered

16% sheltered

38% live in public space

17% live in their vehicle

13% live in a structure not meant for habitation (e.g., condemned building)

Public Space Management: Libraries and Homelessness

The need for public space managers to provide services for vulnerable populations is impacting libraries as well as parks. Libraries across the country from San Francisco, California, to Columbia, South Carolina, now employ social service workers to staff local library branches. These professionals offer medical aid and answer questions such as where to access food-assistance services or sign up for health care. Public libraries have also become de facto shelters for unhoused residents, offering warmth, free bathrooms, stable Wi-Fi connections and a safe place to stay during the day. Most often the conversation around safety in public spaces is about supporting and responding to housed users. Too often we forget that people experiencing homelessness are extremely vulnerable. The National Coalition for the Homeless reported 112 documented attacks against individuals experiencing homelessness in 2016 and 2017, with 33% of those reported attacks taking place in California.[7]

It's important to note that the river park is not a safe place for people to live long term. In the last few years, fires have broken out in undeveloped areas of the park, and several people have drowned in the river. While homelessness is a current condition that park managers must work with, the city, county, state and other policymakers must continue addressing the housing shortage, income inequality and other structural causes of homelessness.

Recognizing the importance of Guadalupe River Park and its current and future impact on the city, we determined that the community needed a way to come together and unpack the relationship between homelessness and public space. If public spaces are indeed open and accessible for all, then how can San Joséans start to think about what coexistence looks like? Could the community determine and agree upon appropriate behaviors in public spaces? And could it enable a park management body to uphold that social contract in a reimagined Guadalupe River Park?

Enforcing Behaviors Equitably

For true coexistence in public spaces, it's critical to manage and enforce acceptable behaviors equitably. It's important to remember that negative behaviors should not be solely attributed to unhoused people. For example, many agree that hearing someone yelling loudly at another person is not comfortable. This behavior is often associated with people experiencing homelessness but can also be observed in housed people stumbling home from a concert, sporting event or other evening activity. In the latter case, enforcement might mean calling the park ranger or police. But the former situation could be better addressed by a social worker equipped to handle mental health issues. While we might respond to the challenge differently depending on the underlying cause, we must hold all people accountable for their behavior regardless of their economic background or race.

Designing for Coexistence in Public Space

To support this research, SPUR partnered with Gehl, a global leader in people-centered urban design. Together we developed a set of public engagement exercises to facilitate productive and empathetic conversations to inform design and policy decisions addressing homelessness in Guadalupe River Park. These exercises can be used to foster understanding and agreement on these issues for any public space.

Our goal is to begin shifting the narrative from: "The park will only be great if there are no homeless people in it" to: "The park will only be great if we **design for coexistence."** Public spaces should be comfortable and engaging for people *with* homes and — until we solve homelessness — for those *without* homes.

SPUR and Gehl talked with public space and park stewards and homeless service advocates in the Bay Area and around the world to better understand what shapes coexistence in public places and to identify core barriers to sharing space. We spoke with housing advocates, social service providers and public space managers to understand the dynamics that play out in public spaces. Additionally, we created an advisory committee to test the Coexistence Toolkit as it relates to Guadalupe River Park. These interviews and conversations were not conducted in the context of one specific park but rather to better understand homelessness and public space in general.

Through these conversations, it became evident that many different factors, systems and roles must come together to shape and sustain coexistence in public space. We identified four facets that allow for coexistence to take shape:

Spatial design and environment
The design and physical features that give shape to a place

Operations and maintenance
The cleaning, oversight and upkeep of a place

Program and activation
The uses and activities that draw people into a space

Rights, rules and accountability
The standards that create a shared civic life

Facets of Coexistence

Dialogue

The engagement processes that connect users

Each of the four facets that support coexistence in public space requires in-depth community dialogue. In order to determine what type of design or program best serves a particular park, community members, park stewards, homeless advocates and government officials need to come together to understand each other's concerns and share ideas. The engagement process connects users and allows them to collectively shape the place and sustain its maintenance over time.

In one example of dialogue on these issues, two Seattle designers collaborated to create temporary "living room" parklets in a bustling neighborhood near a homeless services center. For people experiencing homelessness, the parklet's offering of free food, magazines, games and music made for a lively neighborhood amenity. For passersby, the parklet became a thought-provoking conversation starter, building empathy about the experience of being homeless in the city. This pilot design created a space that not only provided needed resources for those experiencing homelessness but allowed people who live both inside and outside to connect and get to know each other.

Spatial Design and Environment

The design and physical features that give shape to a place

Spatial design focuses on the relationship between design, architecture and the human experience. It considers the conditions that evoke emotion and make a place feel safe or threatening, inviting or unappealing, memorable or forgettable, unique or commonplace. The design elements and infrastructure in a public space play a major role in how people perceive and behave in it. Spatial design in public spaces includes elements such as lighting, seating, shade structures, wayfinding signage and landscaping. In Guadalupe River Park, these elements include benches, picnic tables, tennis courts and public art.

Typically, the people who design or inform the design of these spaces are urban designers, landscape architects and engineers. However, the design of a public space needs to respond to the behaviors of the people in it, which means designers must work closely with current and future users of the space. Designers also need to hold space for people to reflect back on their past experiences and history with that particular place. This requires deep, meaningful engagement that expands past one or two community meetings.

Folkets Park in Copenhagen underwent a redesign that prioritized continuous dialogue as a path toward building trust, ownership and increased usage. Through this community process, the park's designers heard from people experiencing homelessness that lighting — both too much and too little — can impact their ability to rest comfortably and feel safe. The park now hosts design features such as zoned lighting, which allows for certain areas of the path to remain lit while also providing spaces with dim lighting so that unhoused people can sleep comfortably at night without fear of theft.

Place stewards from Urban Alchemy assist a neighbor in San Francisco's Tenderloin District.

Operations and Maintenance

The cleaning, oversight and upkeep of a place

Cities are often really good at finding the capital to build new parks and public spaces and not as successful in securing the ongoing funds needed to maintain and operate them. But cleaning, oversight and upkeep are just as important as the initial investment. Operations and maintenance include repairs, landscaping, cleaning and waste management, which may be carried out by public works or parks departments, volunteer groups, nonprofit agencies or business associations. Especially in urban areas, where high traffic and large gatherings can cause greater wear and tear, the need for a sufficient operations and maintenance budget is critical to the success of a public space.

In San Francisco, an organization called Urban Alchemy employs people who were once unhoused, formerly incarcerated people and others who face significant barriers to employment as place stewards. In partnership with the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development, Urban Alchemy has deployed staff in Civic Center Commons since 2016. Drawing from their own experiences, park stewards are able to balance empathy for people experiencing homelessness with a firm approach to setting behavioral norms and ensuring safe and responsive public space.

Photo by Lou Hammonds, Urban Alchemy

Program and Activation

The uses and activities that draw people into a space

One of the most important elements of public space is the programming of activities and events to draw people in. Like libraries, parks have an opportunity to reimagine their programs to better serve the community. The opportunity for such public space managers is twofold: to create invitations for many types of users — including the unhoused — and to assign responsibility for program management to the most appropriate stakeholders.

In Atlanta's Woodruff Park, which is frequented, and at times lived in, by people experiencing homelessness, the local business improvement district partnered with a local nonprofit to hire a social worker who is now stationed in the park each day. The park also includes a game cart, also staffed by a social worker, where anyone can sign out board games for free.

Programming and activation can also help park users foster greater levels of empathy and understanding for one another. An interdisciplinary studio class at Carnegie Mellon University was tasked with sparking dialogue about the experience of homelessness in Pittsburgh. The goal was to break down the stigma against unhoused people and generate more empathy by sharing stories. The students developed an exhibition featuring a card game that prompted players to move through a set of conditions and causes that could impact a person's level of housing insecurity. The activity demonstrated how health, money and personal relationships interact with social inequality to shape the journey of homelessness. The exhibition was held in Schenley Plaza, a public space often used by people experiencing homelessness.

Rights, Rules and Accountability

The standards that create a shared civic life

In order to achieve coexistence in public space, people need a set of norms and systems for protecting safety, comfort and property. Setting norms requires communities to reach a shared understanding and articulation of both rights and rules in public space. Every person has certain rights or liberties in how they can access and use public space — from exercising to protesting. There are, however, some behaviors and conditions that communities might classify as off-limits or a threat to safety, comfort and property — from harassment to public urination. Communities can codesign rules that allow members to have a safe, functional public space where they can create a shared civic life. Once rights are communicated and rules are established, communities can begin to form systems for both *passive accountability*, such as a set of park rules, and *active accountability*, such as channels for voicing concern when you see a rule being jeopardized. Together these systems ensure a shared civic life respectful of people's rights and of public space rules.

The conversation around rules and enforcement within public space has been elevated by the Black Lives Matter movement. For decades, parks, open spaces and placemaking efforts such as street closures have used a strong police presence to "manage" an area and the behaviors within it. But law enforcement in the public realm can deter people from visiting or from feeling safe and welcomed. Many parks have rules against loitering that dissuade people from lying down or standing in groups without actively engaging in the park's uses. However, racial biases are built in to how we view and define loitering. A group of white male teenagers sitting around a

park bench may be categorized as hanging out, whereas a similar group of Black teens is more likely to be called out for loitering. Pervasive racial stereotypes that cast Black men as dangerous and suspicious unfold often in public space. This was made clear in New York's Central Park in May 2020, when a white woman, Amy Cooper, called the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man who was an avid park user and bird-watcher, simply for telling her to keep her dog on a leash. In a time of increased concern over safety in the public realm, law enforcement is not always the best method for safeguarding rights and norms. We need to reimagine how we manage and hold people accountable for certain behaviors in a space.

HOPE Atlanta, a nonprofit addressing homelessness, has formed a unique partnership with the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District, which manages Woodruff Park. The partnership created a position for a dedicated social worker in the park in an effort to build relationships with unhoused people and connect them to more stable housing options and other services. Since creating this role in 2018, the partnership has placed 135 people in permanent housing and connected more than 1,000 others to social services.[8]

Existing rules such as loitering laws or restrictions on unpermitted vending also deserve reconsideration. Before rules are established, a community should come to a collective understanding of the behaviors and conditions that make people feel uncomfortable in public space. Together, the group can determine what it is about vending or loitering that challenges perceptions of comfort and safety or violates the social contract. Once there is a shared understanding, the community can begin to examine the rules that need to be in place and the staffing necessary to ensure that they are being met.

It's also important to separate people from behaviors. By identifying and defining off-limits behaviors and conditions, communities can design standards and rules to tie accountability to behaviors, not to stereotypes

of people and groups. Vague or unclear articulation of rights and rules such as loitering leave openings for bias, profiling and stereotyping to take root.

The City of Philadelphia's Shared Spaces initiative responds to some of the challenges with people living extendedly in public space. The objective of this program is to ensure safety and respect for all users of public space, create a shared code of conduct, constructively address chronic street homelessness and promote alternatives such as housing, jobs and services. The code of conduct establishes clear standards for behavior in shared public spaces with tools and engagement for supporting them. Through this initiative, the city published a *Guide to Sharing Public Spaces* that articulates a set of guiding values; a list of behaviors that are permitted, prohibited or discouraged; details about which behaviors incur a warning, a fine or arrest; and a list of agencies and phone numbers to contact for help ensuring that these norms are enforced.[9]

Equitable approaches are also needed for managing encampments in public spaces, which are often classified as illegal. In 2016, the Indianapolis City-County Council passed legislation to ensure that anyone displaced from an encampment site receives support from the city. The ordinance designates organizations to help each person find transitional housing and requires that residents be notified 15 days prior to closing a camp. The city's nonprofit partners must find transitional housing before a homeless person can be removed from public property, and a homeless engagement center must provide storage for their belongings for up to 60 days.

How to Use the Coexistence Toolkit

Our team developed three exercises that public space stewards can use to gather public input into design, policy and program decisions. The Coexistence Toolkit was developed with the underlying principle that **all people, whether they have a permanent home or not, have a right to access and participate in public space**. When testing and refining these exercises, our team worked with a cross-sector advisory committee representing homeless service agencies, environmentalists, city government and the downtown San José business improvement district. The exercises were also tested on locations in Guadalupe River Park, although as of publication, no government agency or nonprofit organization had used them in an official capacity to gather data.

These exercises can help guide a community through a practice of better understanding how to create just, welcoming and healthy spaces where all kinds of people can coexist. We also want to explore what shapes coexistence in public places — and identify core challenges — so communities can better share space. The toolkit is designed to be used at the community level, in public meetings and at events that inform public space projects, master planning efforts and visioning sessions. It includes a slide presentation and worksheets (see **spur.org/coexistence**) and is designed for a group led by a facilitator. We recommend that city agencies, nonprofit organizations and other park stewards conduct these exercises at the beginning of a community process to help ground future conversations in shared values and understanding.

Exercise No. 1:
Determining Shared Values

The first exercise is a two-part activity to determine the values that people hold for public space and better understand their level of support for each value set. This exercise is particularly useful if people disagree about what priorities should govern a public space. These exercises were designed in partnership with our advisory committee, which included people working directly with Guadalupe River Park as well as public space practitioners from across the country. While other exercises in the toolkit can be adapted for specific spaces, these five values should remain consistent regardless of the public space. (See the list of values on page 20.) When leading this activity, the facilitator shows the group the five values one at a time and asks participants to agree or disagree. Setting and agreeing to a set of values is extremely important on the road to achieving safe coexistence in public space. As much as the exercises are designed to offer potential ideas for solutions, this activity also aims to spark a new way of thinking and viewing the built environment. In addition, it helps to uncouple specific behaviors from one population group and show that all users and visitors of a space need to agree with and uphold these principles.

After participants have responded to each of the values, the facilitator can move the group into a full discussion using the second values worksheet (see page 20).

This allows people to share which value resonated most, as well as the challenges they found. This time of reflection presents an opportunity for the group to determine a sixth value statement that might be unique to the place they are considering. This exercise provides the baseline to move into the next two activities.

Agree or disagree?

1

People and the structures they build should respect the natural environments and ecosystems they inhabit.

2

Public space should be accessible, safe, delightful, and welcoming for all, without privileging one person or group over another.

3

Public space should be shared among people of different backgrounds, identities, and experiences (e.g., race, ability, income).

4

Everyone has a responsibility to fulfill the social contract — an implicit commitment to mutual protection and well-being.

5

The community should help define how the social contract is maintained with respect to everyone's dignity.

Your Take

—

What are your reflections on the 'values' exercise?

Which resonate with you most or least? Why?

What would you add?

What would you remove?

Exercise No. 2:
Determining Acceptable Behaviors

Having a social contract in place helps ensure that the values determined in the first exercise are upheld. For example, value two states that public space should be accessible, safe, delightful and welcoming for all, without privileging one person or group over another.

Defining a spectrum of acceptable behaviors is a fundamental component of the social contract. These behaviors need to uphold the aforementioned values. The second exercise asks, "How do different behaviors in public space make us feel?"

Our team started by comparing three sets of public space rules to gauge what types of behaviors are off-limits. We examined rules set by the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development (which manages the city's Civic Center spaces), San Francisco Public Library and San José Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services. Between these three agencies, there were 80 behaviors and conditions.

How does seeing these behaviors make you feel?

Rate on the scale provided, using the instructions on the back.

PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE

Damaging property

(e.g., turning a trashcan over)

PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE

Lighting fires

PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE

Illegal fishing

PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE

Dumping waste in the river / land

PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE

Misusing restrooms

(e.g., for drugs, lewd activities)

PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE

Informal vending

PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE

Residing in public space

(e.g., vehicles, tent, encampment of 6+ tents)

Didn't find what you were looking for?

Write in behaviors and conditions you might see in public space. For the behaviors and conditions on the previous side, and any you add, rate how each behavior or condition makes you feel on the spectrum below:

① — ② — ③ — ④ — ⑤

Doesn't bother you — you might even welcome it

Acutely disturbs your sense of safety and calm

The behaviors exercise draws from some of the most common behaviors the three agencies describe, as well as specific conditions found in Guadalupe River Park. The behaviors worksheet asks participants to share their reactions to a range of behaviors and site conditions, from physical aggression to some that land in the gray area of the social contract, such as hygiene or lying on a bench. There is also room to write in missing behaviors.

The worksheet identifies four behavior categories: property and landscape, public health, drugs and alcohol, and harassment. Participants rate each behavior on a scale of one to five, one being "doesn't bother you — you might even welcome it" and five being "acutely disturbs your sense of safety and calm." By moving through this exercise, participants are able to uncouple a type of person or group from a certain behavior. It also allows them to reflect on how severely that action or condition impacts their experience or perception of a physical space. The results can help agencies understand how to prioritize their responses to issues. For example, if the exercise illuminates that unmanaged litter and belongings are impacting bike riders on a trail, park managers will know where to target cleanup efforts.

Exercise No. 3:
Identifying and Fostering Coexistence

A diverse group of roles and people are needed to foster coexistence. First there are designers, planners and community organizations who help create the conditions and set the tone for coexistence. Then there are those who can intervene when coexistence is at risk, such as park stewards, social workers, and security and police officers.

The third exercise asks people to consider accountability for each facet of coexistence in public space. It asks, "How do we shape civic space where we can coexist?" It allows participants to articulate the current people or systems responsible for fostering coexistence and to share other potential models or policies that could uphold agreed-upon values and acceptable behaviors.

A diverse group of actors fosters coexistence.

PASSIVE ACCOUNTABILITY
—
Actors who help create the conditions and set the tone for coexistence.

Designers & Planners make sure places can invite coexistence to begin with.

Small Businesses & Community Organizations activate the space and invite diverse activity.

Operations & Maintenance Staff & Volunteers take care of upkeep so the place stays inviting.

ACTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY
—
Actors who can intervene when coexistence is at risk.

Park Stewards can be the first responders to issues that come up in a public space.

Social Workers can address behavioral health challenges (e.g., drug abuse).

Police can intervene as a last resort, when there is a material threat to safety.

This is a productive way to begin discussing how to manage certain aspects of a public space. It allows room for creative ideas and new models for delivering on the vision and values set for a space. This is also where the community can start to uncover policies that need to be changed or created, as well as potential funding needs. For instance, if consensus emerges that hiring social service workers to conduct outreach within the park would improve conditions for all users, community members might be motivated to advocate for a new policy and budget allocation.

In conjunction, these three tools create a road map for identifying important resources, such as new investment to hire social service workers or policy changes to increase dedicated maintenance and trash cleanup.

Coexistence in Your Place

—
Share how you account for each facet of coexistence in your public space (e.g., roles, protocols, etc.)

Who is responsible for **Spatial Design & Environment?**

[Your response here]

Who is responsible for **Operations & Maintenance?**

[Your response here]

Who is responsible for **Program & Activation?**

[Your response here]

Who is responsible for **Rights, Rules & Accountability?**

[Your response here]

Who is responsible for **Dialogue?**

[Your response here]

A New Approach for Communities

Every year the City of San José releases a national community survey to measure the city's performance based on resident response.[10] The report shows that a majority of San Joséans interact with city government through their use of public parks. Parks and public spaces play an important role in shaping San José's neighborhoods and communities. The condition of these spaces evokes strong reactions and emotions in their users and in neighbors. These individual feelings and levels of discomfort differ based on internal perspectives, identities and lived experiences. For city officials and others responsible for managing and designing public space, it can be hard to account for all these unique perspectives, especially when public spaces serve such a wide variety of people. This challenge emerges quite clearly in the context of determining what designs or programs to implement in public spaces. Urban parks such as Guadalupe River Park are often a visible reflection of the dynamics and larger challenges occurring within a city.

The Coexistence Toolkit offers a way to respond directly to this dynamic. How might we begin to design spaces in a way that acknowledges our individual feelings and priorities while taking into account the greater social challenges and forces at play in our communities? The tools described in this report offer a guide for government staff and other park stewards to facilitate difficult conversations about values, norms, behavior and enforcement. When we tested these exercises out with our advisory committee, it was remarkable to see how they created an opening for people to expand their thinking and question their assumptions and biases.

We see this toolkit as a critical step in creating shared spaces that foster coexistence. We recommend that it become a formal part of city engagement efforts for informing new or existing public space design. It can also be used by nonprofit agencies that manage or program public spaces. While we have seen how this resource can help shift mindsets and behaviors, it can also produce valuable insights and data to inform policy decisions. As Guadalupe River Park continues to evolve, this resource can be extremely valuable for showcasing why certain investments and changes, such as increased maintenance and trash collection, are needed. It also begins to help redefine the narrative about the park and present a new perspective for how it can operate over time.

This report represents a new approach for communities to rethink the role of parks and who they serve. It serves as the first step in our thinking on coexistence and public space and will complement further research on Guadalupe River Park. Upcoming SPUR reports will provide policy recommendations on better enhancing the park's natural ecology and economic impact. These reports address challenges facing Guadalupe River Park and will present key opportunities and recommendations for how to move the park into its next chapter.

Endnotes

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