

GREENWICH VILLAGE:  
STATISTICAL TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS

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## ABINGDON SQUARE PARK: A COMMUNITY STUDY

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Abingdon Square Park actually consists of two parks, both roughly triangular in shape, and separated by 8th Avenue. The older of the two, built some time between the two World Wars, is bounded by 8th Avenue, Hudson Street and West 12th Street. Enclosed by a fence and a row of trees, the park is rimmed with benches with a small sandbox and swings for infants located at opposite ends. In the center there stands a statue of a soldier with the inscription: "erected by popular subscription in honor of the brave men who went forth from this neighborhood to join the armed forces of the United States in the World War." For purposes of this study I shall refer to the older of the two parks as Park II.

The second park, bounded by Bleecker, Hudson and West 11th Streets was opened in June of 1966. The northern portion of this park, which is depressed several feet below street level, has facilities for children from approximately age seven to infants. There is a jungle gym, a large sandbox, a tower from which the ladder has been removed, and several interesting objects. The southern third of the park, unlike the depressed area, is not enclosed by a fence and is at street level. This area serves the interests of the elderly and is composed of benches, chess tables and a bulletin board. Throughout this study I shall refer to these areas as Park I Upper and Park I Lower. Unlike Park II the benches in Park I are randomly located throughout, as are the trees and play items, in an attempt to have a more aesthetically pleasing result.

On their northern side, the parks are bordered by the start of the manufacturing area. As a result of this, there is a great deal of commercial traffic on the streets surrounding the parks. Directly across the street from Park II the Village Nursing Home is located, a private institution accomodating approximately 300 patients. On its other sides the park complex is surrounded by apartment buildings, small walk-ups, and several stores -- a bar, two grocery stores, a pharmacy and a coffee shop.

The park is located at the junction of four census tracts with a combined population of 20,020 which is for the most part white and middle class. Senior citizens comprise 18.9% of this total population; while children under 5 and those between the ages of 5 and 10 each make up 4.6% of the total; children ages 11 to 15, 3.5%; aged 16 to 20, 3.1%; and adults between the ages of 21 and 59, 65.1%.

Although the area as a whole has turned in greater Democratic majorities in the presidential elections since 1952 than the nation as a whole, the older population, over age 50, appears to be basically conservative and Republican. It is the population under age 50; and especially those under age 30, who produce the Democratic majorities, and who vote for "liberal" or "radical" candidates.

### A History of Abingdon Square Park

When the city of New York bought a triangle of land bordered by Bleecker, Hudson and West 11th Streets from the bankrupt Stetler Warehouse, the stage was set for a unique community action. New York City parks have traditionally been planned, built and run under the complete supervision of the New York Parks Commission. The results have often been unfortunate: many parks are not suited to the surrounding area and are not used, others fall into disrepair and attract undesirable people.

Although there is a small park across the street from the old warehouse, the Parks Commission felt that it was not sufficient to accomodate the rapidly increasing population in the area and the newly acquired land was designated as a potential park area. The Parks Commission, without taking into consideration the area in which the park was to be built, quickly drew up a totally unimaginative plan for a new recreation area -- a carbon copy of numerous other "concrete parks" throughout the city. According to this plan, the park was to be largely a series of fenced in concrete courts for basketball, handball and volleyball. A small area was to be set aside for small children and would include such things as slides, swings, a sandbox and a sprinkler. No provision was made for the elderly.

Fifteen feet of the Stetler Warehouse land was to be used to widen Bleecker Street in an attempt to ease the traffic problem on 8th Avenue and to funnel traffic toward the Holland Tunnel. Extra land was to be added, and the sidewalk would also be narrowed in compensation.

When it became public knowledge that a park was to be built and that Bleecker Street was to be widened, the attention of the community was immediately captured. The Greenwich Village Association, The Village Home Owners, The Bleecker Street Association, Bleecker Gardens, Committee to Save the West Village and Village Independent Democrats all took up the cause of opposition to the widening of Bleecker Street and also expressed a desire to be consulted before the construction of a park. It was the Planning Board, however, which proved instrumental, largely in part due to its energetic and dedicated members.

First a study of the population in the area was compiled from the census data in order to determine what needs already existed in the community. The park was to be located in the center of four census tracts comprising a total population of 20,020. It was found that senior citizens and young children (in that order) were the two most numerous groups which could be expected to use the park.

At the same time, the Planning Board began to pressure the Parks Commission to tear down an old and unattractive comfort station on the northern point of land adjacent to the area where the warehouse had been torn down. Aside from the community need for the land, the Planning Board's argument was further legitimized because the station was an obstruction to vision of drivers on a dangerous corner and numerous accidents were attributed to it. This battle was easily won and the old comfort station was torn down.



The two great controversies then became the plan for the park and the widening of Bleecker Street. On both issues the Planning Board won an unprecedented victory. Bleecker Street was widened, but only by three feet (as opposed to fifteen), a face saving device for the Parks Commission. After a short struggle the Commission consented to the Planning Board's request that it be allowed to submit architectural plans for the park. The Board consulted with three architects (Robert Nichols, Robert Jacobs, Norman Rosenfeld) and the three resulting plans were proposed to the Parks Commission. Building was delayed for a year while the Commission considered various plans and made a series of compromises with the Planning Board.

The Planning Board's concern was not only with community needs, but also with the aesthetic value of the new park as well. As a part of its long struggle to retain the beauty of Greenwich Village and to have it proclaimed an historical landmark, the Board became worried over the prospect of a concrete park.

By this time the Village Voice had also taken an interest in the controversy. The newspaper ran a series of articles picturing parks which had been planned without taking the community needs or the architecture of the surrounding area into consideration first.

Two minor problems arose concerning a new comfort station and a custodial service. Several people in the community opposed the building of a comfort station because they feared that it would attract bums, as had the previous one. However, the only alternative for young children in need of a rest room would then be a bar across the street. A vote of all participating community groups was overwhelmingly in favor of a comfort station, which was then added to the architect's plans. From the start all groups concerned agreed on the need for a custodian especially in view of the fact that there would be a new comfort station. This demand was also met by the city.

A third idea which never materialized was that of joining the two parks. This proved impossible since such a plan would have necessitated closing off a block of 8th Avenue which is very heavily travelled. The idea of a large overpass between the parks was then contemplated, but it received little, if any, support.

The final plans certified by the Parks Commission were largely in keeping with those submitted by the Planning Board: not only the community needs, but also aesthetic value were taken into consideration. This marked the first time that a community had succeeded in playing a dominant role in the planning of a new park. The occasion was celebrated by a large gathering on June 18, 1966 when the park was officially opened.

Community action did not stop with the opening of the park. In the first year of its operation, several children fell from a ladder leading up to a toy tower and suffered broken bones. A group of concerned mothers circulated a petition asking for the removal of the ladder as a safety hazard. At the same time, the Planning Board was made aware of the safety element and recommended to the Parks Commission that the ladder be removed. The request was soon acted upon and the ladder taken down.

### The Function of Abingdon Square Park

The new park at Abingdon Square serves primarily as a meeting place for friends as well as the friendless, and a play area for children. This was the anticipated need, according to the Planning Board, and it appears to have been successfully met.

Park II, on the other hand, is primarily a sitting area. Few groups use the park; rather, there is a large transient population. Individuals enter the park to rest or to pass the time; they tend not to associate with others in the park, and leave as they entered, usually alone.

The West Village as a whole also has a large transient population. The manufacturing area attracts a large number of people from 9 to 5, and the small shops and coffee houses, for which the area is famous, attracts shoppers and tourists. These visitors to the area occasionally use the park also.

### Community Feeling and Group Divisions

The physical construction of the two parks in Abingdon Square has furthered the formation of informal groups and has influenced attitudes on "community spirit". During the first weeks of this study, observation was made of those who used the park and what functions the park served. People were later questioned as to their opinion of this particular park. The study was explained to these individuals as a survey for a sociology course at New York University concerning peoples' satisfaction with park facilities. This usually proved to be a good introduction: people were glad to help a student interested in talking about something other than Vietnam and were often hopeful that voicing their complaints might have some influence. On the whole people were extremely obliging and volunteered information readily.

Park I was planned largely to accommodate two groups: young children and their mothers in the depressed area, and senior citizens in the upper portion. The result has been a division of the park according to age group which is strictly adhered to and has, perhaps, led to a greater feeling of group or community spirit due to greater personal contacts among individuals of a homogeneous group. While a few middle-aged people use the lower park, very few of the elderly venture down the ramp except to use the rest room. Because the upper park is not protected from the traffic by a fence, mothers with young children (even those with infants in baby carriages) seldom, if ever, use this area.

To the question, "Do you think there is a feeling of community spirit in this particular park?" it was discovered that the response could be determined by the age of the respondent. Most young mothers responded positively: specific answers ranged from an emphatic "yes" to a feeling that everybody knew everybody else and was at least on talking terms, to one woman who felt that everyone felt a common loyalty to the park itself, to a few who mentioned the action of the mothers in petitioning for the removal of the children's play ladder. Young mothers and their children comprise the largest group which regularly use the park, but the majority who visited the park at the same time appear to be "at least on speaking terms." The great entering wedge to new friendships was children. Mothers



were continually apologizing to other mothers for what their son or daughter had done to other children. Several mothers with their first infants were always comparing notes on what to expect next when they weren't busy accepting advice from the parents of older children. Mothers also tend to watch out for each others' children. No baby was allowed to cry for long before being rescued by his mother or some other nearby adult.

The group of young mothers who visit the park appear to be very homogeneous, a factor which would perhaps add to a community feeling. The majority were between the ages of 23 and 27, white, middle class, well-educated and with liberal political views. Those who read newspapers while in the park usually chose the New York Times or the Village Voice. Others brought books to read of an intellectual nature. Although they were always well-dressed, the young mothers were not generally flaunting in the latest fashions: bell bottom slacks was the extent of their "mod-ness".

In response to a political survey both before and after the election, all respondents in the park, male and female, who were under age 30 anticipated voting or did vote for either Humphrey, McCarthy or Cleaver. All were extremely aware of the issues and quite well-read. Although several expressed a complete disillusionment with the political process in the past few years, all were registered and planned to or did vote.

A final unifying factor among young mothers is geographical proximity. All live near enough to the park to walk there every day, and probably meet each other in other places such as the grocery store or the laundromat.

When questioned about community feeling, the elderly people were not as quick to respond as were the young mothers. Most asked me to explain what I meant by "community feeling", and when I attempted, several still failed to understand the question. However, those who did respond for the large part answered in the negative. While most knew others who visited the park, or at least recognized the same faces day after day, a feeling of community usually only extended as far as a few personal friends or the group who sat on the same bench every day. No one in this group was aware of the community action which had taken place during the building of the park or the action of the mothers in getting the ladder removed.

There is a greater degree of heterogeneity found in this group than among the young mothers. The most basic difference is sex: the elderly are equally divided between male and female, and there is little mingling of the sexes. The spectrum of socio-economic background was also greater in this group, ranging from vagrant to lower middle class. This was, however, a 10% white group of people.

Occupation and geographical proximity presented further social barriers for the elderly. Those women who worked as nannies did not live in the area and did not associate with the "local people", nor did they visit the area when they were not working. Of course, the nannies were generally about ten years younger than the local elderly group which was, for the most part, past retirement age.

While few of the elderly women or nannies read newspapers at the park, the men were rarely without reading matter, usually the Daily News. Those who read newspapers were eager to talk about political events, but more often about the latest disaster -- a riot or a collapsed mine or a student demonstration, the female vagrant being the best example. Those who did not read at the park tended to direct their conversation along the same lines: their poor health, their family -- especially family problems, and the moral disintegration of the younger generation.

The group of young mothers in Park II was not consistent with this analysis. Although I only spoke with five mothers, none professed any feeling of community or any knowledge of community action. Several reasons could be cited for this. The group of young mothers in Park II are not frequent visitors of the area, as was true of their counterparts in Park I. Furthermore, the mothers usually came at different times, and more than one was seldom there at the same time.

The visitors of Park I can easily be classed into three categories: young mothers (and their children), senior citizens, and "non-people". Young mothers I have already discussed, but in this group one will find an occasional father as well. This is a homogeneous group with regard to race (white), age (23-27), interests (children), political views (liberal) and physical proximity. The same group visits the park at the same time every day (weather permitting) and individuals are forced to come into contact through their children.

The elderly are a less homogeneous group, divided according to sex, interests and physical proximity. This group is most numerous in the morning when the sun is out and before the young children have come. Several stop by the park on their way to do the day's shopping, others while taking their dog for a walk. Even the female vagrant is an accepted member of this group.

The non-people includes two subdivisions -- the non-white and the non-retired, specifically the nannies. Very few non-whites visit this park (I only saw two), but those who do come sit alone and are not spoken to. In fact, it appeared as if they were not even noticed. One Black mother who I saw only on one occasion was continually yelling at her son for lying on the pavement or playing too roughly with the younger children. She sat on an empty bench in the shade, while the rest of the mothers were congregating on those seats which remained in the sun. The nannies also sat alone talking neither among themselves nor to the "local" people. Although some visited the park every day, they never returned after work. When I spoke with the nannies, they were defensive about their job, saying such things as they could have had numerous other jobs, but they didn't want to have to get dressed up every day. The local people in the park never spoke to the nannies, nor did they even appear to be aware that they were even present.

During the teachers' strike the depressed area of the park was playground for a temporary group -- children out of school between the ages of 7 and 12. This was a relatively homogeneous group -- all well-dressed, victims of circumstances, residents of the same area. Several of the children, however, were Spanish. There are no facilities in the park for this



age group, but the children didn't seem to mind: most of their games consisted of running around and through the comfort station. When the strike was over and schools re-opened, this group disappeared from the park, even after school let out in the afternoon.

There is not a similar categorization for the people of Park II -- this is an area of individuals rather than of groups. Several of the old and senile from the nursing home across the street visit the park periodically, but always alone or in pairs. Once in the park, they carry on little or no conversation, and leave separately. Nor do the same individuals visit the park at the same time on different days. The park also serves as a resting place for passers-by as well as a bed for vagrants, people who do not visit the park regularly. Those mothers who visit the park do so primarily in order to use the swing and are not frequent visitors.

### Attitudes and Prejudices

My original reason for studying the Abingdon Square complex was to investigate attitudes and prejudices. On my first visit to Park I two women told me that they never went to the park across the street because it was frequented by "undesirables". When I crossed the street I did in fact find two vagrants sleeping on the park benches, the largest number which I was ever to find there, one was White, the other Black.

The majority of people who visit one park regularly, rarely if ever visit the other park. They all, however, held strong opinions about the park which some had never even set foot in. A universal complaint was cleanliness -- everyone thought that the other park was dirtier than their own. The major complaint concerning Park II was vagrants, drunks, Blacks and the old from the Nursing Home across the street. Park I was criticized primarily for the noise caused by all the small children. Most of these criticisms were true; however, I believe all were exaggerated.

Concerning cleanliness, the same parks man was responsible for both parks, and both are kept exceptionally clean. The only legitimate complaint here is that the sand in the tiny sand box or Park II is badly in need of changing. However, when referring to the dirt in Park II, only one person specifically mentioned this problem. The cause for the lack of cleanliness in the other park was generally attributed to the lack of custodial service.

Although Park I was not devoid of Negroes, Park II did appear to have a higher Black population. However, due to the overwhelming whiteness of the neighborhood both parks only accommodated a very small percentage of non-whites.

Park II also attracted vagrants more than Park I, perhaps because it is more secluded, quieter and less populated. However, the vagrant population was also very small, and this observer was never aware of seeing the same bum more than once except in Park I. The closest approximation to encountering an alcoholic in Park II was a man drinking a can of beer and one young, well-dressed, cleanly shaven, but intoxicated man. Be-



cause the Village Nursing Home is located directly across the street, several of the old patients visited the park, but again, this consisted of only a very small number of people.

It was this group of people; bums, Blacks, drunks and the old, which never totaled more than ten during the entire time of my study, which caused the elderly in Park I to label Park II as undesirable. Before the construction of the new park, the majority of elder citizens had used Park II. However, with the opening of the new park, those who lived south of 8th Avenue began to use Park I because it was closer to their homes and prevented them from having to cross at a dangerous five-way corner. Many of the young mothers, on the other hand, have moved into the area in the past three years after the construction of the new park and have never had occasion to use Park II.

While several of the young mothers complained of bums and the senile in Park II, they did not mention Blacks or alcoholics as a problem. Their overwhelming criticism of the old park was its lack of facilities and lack of cleanliness. The reaction was not so much negative toward Park II as it was positive in favor of Park I. Most mothers voiced enthusiastic preference for Park I for such reasons as its improved facilities, protection from traffic and its usage by the majority of other young mothers. Very few mentioned that the new area was near to their home.

The nannies were the only group which did not express enthusiastic support or condemnation for one park over the other. Most of the women in this group chose Park I because it had been recommended to them by their employer. When asked if they liked the park area, two women in Park I replied yes, I feel at home here, like I know the area. Only one nanny said that she would not use Park II because of bums and alcoholics. The only nanny that I spoke to in Park II said that she chose that particular area because it was the shortest distance for her to walk. She had no complaints about the facilities for young children, and therefore saw no reason to try the other park.