



Bruce Douglas and Sue Mark work to preserve historic parks.

A Walk Through the Parks Microcosms of Culture in Downtown

BY RENEE MACALINO RUTLEDGE PHOTOGRAPHY JAN STÜRMANN

If the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, imagine where 10,000 steps can take you. Perhaps through time and back again, among the daily lives of communities steeped in culture and tradition. Stories are embedded in the footsteps all around us, even those traveled in the heart of downtown Oakland.

When Oakland was founded in the early 19th century, seven parks were established to green the urban landscape. Five of these historic parks – Jefferson, Lafayette, Lincoln, Madison and Harrison – are still around, though many Oaklanders have either forgotten them or have never known them at all.

Artists Sue Mark and Bruce Douglas, a husband-wife team, spearheaded a project in 2007 to help Oakland residents and visitors remember these parks and understand their value. →

Projects



Originally from the East Coast, Douglas and Mark have lived in Oakland about 20 years. They met while working on a community art project for a pocket park in Temescal.

With support from Friends of Oakland Parks and Recreation and local community groups, plus financial backing from the Creative Work Fund and Oakland's Cultural Funding Program, Mark and Douglas are creating *10,000 Steps: Walking the Invisible City*, a permanent self-guided walking tour among four of the parks. The first of its kind in Oakland, *10,000 Steps* is a \$66,000 project with 50 sidewalk markers placed around and between the parks, free printed tour maps for community organizations, a regularly updated website with text, photos, maps and video of the project and a three-month audio cell phone tour to complement pedestrians' experience.

"A poetic pedestrian mosaic, this walking tour will be an organic and growing reflection of Oakland's changing cityscape," Mark says. "We want downtown walkers to learn about Oakland's vibrant community, dynamic history and historic open spaces. Marked with permanent conversational sidewalk 'stepping-stones,' the looped walk will reveal the city within the city: hidden local lore, architectural and cultural history and points of urban transformation all centered in and around these four historic parks."

Mark and Douglas have spent the past two years raising awareness about the parks listening to stories and collecting feedback from residents about their connection to

the outdoor spaces. They believe parks should reflect the needs of residents whose day-to-day lives are connected to their neighborhood spaces. "*Walking the Invisible City* is about finding and sharing the stories no one knows about," Mark says.

Tina Ramos played in Jefferson Square Park as a child, along with other Latino children who once lived in the area in large number. Ramos is a third-generation owner of her family's shop, La Borinquena Mexican, which has a 60-plus year history near the park. She can recall excited school children on the Jefferson Park playground playing soccer, basketball, baseball and other sports each afternoon.

"My hope is that Jefferson Square will once again be a hub of community activity now that the park renovations are moving along," Ramos says. "If all goes well, the park will have both a small and large dog park and a new basketball court and playground, in addition to the current field."

Ramos takes pride in the historical treasures hidden away in her own neighborhood and believes *10,000 Steps* will help preserve her community's stories. "*Walking the Invisible City* is ensuring that this data is researched, organized and that it will be distributed to Oaklanders to get to know this section of the city."

In downtown Oakland, microcosms of culture surrounding the four parks have been meaningfully involved with these spaces for decades. Madison Square Park, near the Lake Merritt BART Station, is home to local tai chi groups that

congregate daily between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m., forming a sea of undulating arms and legs. The qigong teacher who leads them, 87-year-old Larry Choi, has volunteered his time teaching for 20 years.

Located between 10th and 11th streets and Jefferson and Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Lafayette Square Park was renovated under the leadership of pioneering landscape architect and local hero Walter Hood in the 1990s. Hood ensured that all park users, including the homeless, were taken into consideration for park design, resulting in amenities such as rain shelters, accessible restrooms, barbecue pits, tables

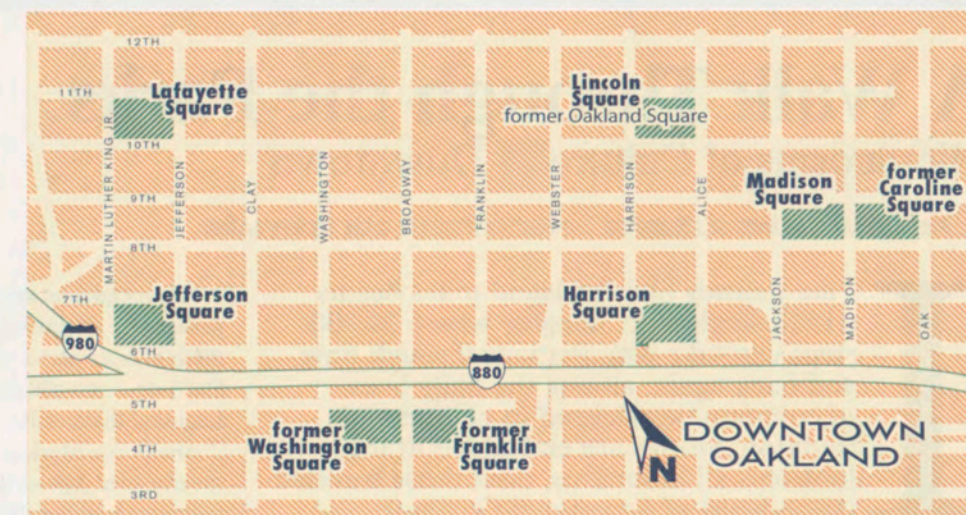
for chess games and seating for the lunch-break crowd.

Jefferson Park, near the constant hum of Interstate 880, feels sorely underused, but Mark points out that it's the only park in the area with a baseball diamond and soccer field. Nevertheless, the park is desolate and empty, a far cry from its days as an active gathering spot between the 1880s and 1940s for visitors with Portuguese, Irish and African-American

roots. That was well before eminent domain gave rise to the freeway, BART and the post office. The city's current plans for renovating Jefferson Park include replacing the defunct recreation center with a dog park.

Among the four parks included in the walking tour, Lincoln Park between 10th and 11th and Harrison and Alice streets, feels the most utilized, with a functioning recreation center, senior classes sponsored by the Chinese American Citizens Alliance and the ongoing presence of Darlene Lee,

EACH PARK HAS ITS OWN DISTINCT CULTURE AND FLAVOR, AND WALKING THE INVISIBLE CITY ATTEMPTS TO CAPTURE AND PRESERVE THE UNIQUE HISTORIES AS WELL AS FUNCTION AS COMMUNITY-BUILDING MEETING GROUNDS.



Douglas collects stories from Zazu Byrd (far right) at Jefferson Square.

an Oakland Parks and Recreation employee who's been dubbed the "park mom" by hundreds of Chinatown kids for whom she's been an after-school mentor and advocate. Beautifying the space are a butterfly garden and monogrammed park benches, built and designed by park users and *10,000 Steps*.

Each park has its own distinct culture and flavor, and *Walking the Invisible City* attempts to capture and preserve the unique histories as well as function as community-building meeting grounds.

Some history will be offered on 2-by-2 sidewalk markers, made from a durable pre-formed thermoplastic. The markers incorporate the green and yellow colors



10,000 Steps "ambassadors" Hoang Banh and Tina Ramos

of official park signage, and brief text, depending on the locations, will be written in English, Chinese or Spanish. Walkers will be able to follow the tour via the markers in any order.

"Downtown Oakland has undergone significant urban transformation; many of the reminders of local history, stories and cultural signifiers have been removed or destroyed," Douglas says. "As a permanent installation, *Walking the Invisible City* will continue to reflect the community back to itself, expressing community pride and making questions about the city's open space and transformation part of the →

Projects



Spreading the word about the project at Art & Soul

vernacular landscape. The text-based sidewalk markers will be stepping-stones for on-going community conversations about the neighborhood: vanished architecture, culture, history and local ecology."

As Oakland continues to change and progress, with skyscrapers, new condos and other projects appearing downtown, this installation will remind community stakeholders and policy makers to preserve their historic parks.

"It's about democracy and inclusion," Douglas says. "Parks are one of the few truly public spaces within the urban landscape, equally accessible to all members of the community."

Douglas and Mark want residents to travel from one park to the other, a distance of about 50 city blocks. They intend for their stepstones to reveal secrets about the adjoining areas. "The communities surrounding the western and eastern parks are very different culturally, but they do share many of the same concerns for their neighborhoods and their parks. We would like more cross-Broadway exchanges because while the areas are physically very close, most people do not move out of their habitual zones. Meeting other neighbors enhances understanding of place. Also, with the reduction of city services, we believe that communities need to work together to create the change that they would like for their neighborhoods," Mark says. "And it is a wonderful opportunity to be a tourist in your own backyard."

10,000 Steps: Walking the Invisible City is expected to launch in the early spring, and installation of the walking tour markers will begin this fall. Tax-deductible contributions can be made to Friends of Oakland Parks and Recreation by visiting www.10000stepsoakland.org. →