

Faces and Places: Let Us Build Cully Park

What does it mean to belong to a place, to a physical environment? Whether it's a community center, a school, a basketball court or a park, our surroundings, the places where we live out our lives, play a significant role in shaping our experiences in them. For the Cully neighborhood in North East Portland, the relationship between the community and its physical surroundings is undergoing a transformative and strengthening process. From a garbage pit to a park upon a hill built with thousands of hands, Cully Park has truly become a beacon of the community – and its not even finished yet!

As I sat in my car in the parking lot of an industrial warehouse studying the map semi-trucks charged down the road I had just turned off of, I reassured myself that I was indeed in the right place. I was looking for the offices of Verde. I thought I was going to visit an organization devoted to environmental wealth, how was I lost in a world so opposite from the serenity one pictures of natural places – quiet, calm, not about to be hit by a semi-truck! After crossing traffic a couple of times, I found Verde's offices tucked amongst the warehouses. Verde is indeed a non-profit organization devoted to building environmental wealth through social enterprise, outreach and advocacy, and after learning about their mission and their work in the Cully neighborhood, it made perfect sense why they are nestled in the industrial chaos – because this chaos represents what the Cully neighborhood has faced without access to a natural space, hence the deep need for environmental equity.

The Cully neighborhood is not only low-income and incredibly racially diverse (50% white, 15% African American and 20% Hispanic according to the 2010 Census), it is also one of the most park deficient neighborhoods in the City of Portland. According to a study conducted in 2006 by the Coalition for a Livable Future and Portland State University's Population Research Center call the *Regional Equity Atlas Project*, only 5% of Cully residents within a quarter-mile of a natural area, while the city average is 34% and only 24% of Cully's residents live within a quarter-mile of a park or green space, compared with a citywide average of 50%. Cully has 2,780 residents per acre of park; the city average is 40 residents per acre. Check out this article to learn more - <http://portlandtribune.com/component/content/article?id=100791>.

These statistics are changing however with the establishment of Cully Park via the "Let Us Build Cully Park" project. Together with fourteen other community-based organizations, including the Columbia Slough Watershed Council, the Cully Association of Neighbors, Hacienda CDC, Latino Network, Native American Youth & Family Center and Portland Community Reinvestment Initiatives, Verde has orchestrated the development of a neighborhood park. I was lucky enough to spend time at the park with Tony DeFalco, the Living Cully Coordinator, on a beautiful fall afternoon. The park is located just blocks away from the Verde offices, although its hard to believe standing in the middle of it. We start at the community garden – the only completed portion of the park. Managed by Portland Parks & Recreation, the gated area is home to 35 plots ranging in size from 20x20 to 5x10 , walking through the rows of plots I see tomatillos, squash, green tomatoes, corn – the corn! As you can see from the picture here, the corn is almost twelve feet tall. The community garden isn't built atop a landfill, but the remainder of the 25 acre site is a former

construction waste landfill. The community spent a year analyzing the safety of the site for park development. It's safe to build here.

Heading out of the garden Tony and I climb a small hill and are transported. With the sunshine, the light cool breeze, the views of Mt. Hood and the city below, I feel like I could be in a rendition of the opening scene of the Sound of Music. Yes, I know this is corny and maybe a bit silly, but I am trying to express how transformative this space feels from the industrial chaos I had been experiencing earlier. As we walk across the stretch of land, Tony tells me about the vision for the park, and how this vision came about. He points out where the soccer fields will be, the running trails, the playground and the Tribal Gathering Garden. What is so unique about this vision, these plans, is the involvement of the community in the development process. Everything from soil testing to playground and community garden design and construction involved community members in some way. By utilizing local organizations like Oregon Tradeswomen, employing neighborhood residents and seeking authentic input from the diverse groups in Cully such as Native American and Latino organizations, this park is truly a community collaboration. Verde and its partners have worked hard to create a sense of ownership and belonging to this place, to empower the people of Cully to take part in how their surroundings are shaped.

For the students of Cully, the story is no different. The community garden was designed by a group of 7th and 8th graders from Scott School, and students are designing the play structure as well. After exploring Cully Park I headed over to Hacienda Community Development Corporation, a local affordable housing organization in the neighborhood, to see the student planning in action. At Hacienda I was greeted by the organized chaos that often accompanies the first portion of an afterschool program – kids finding their way to the community room, grabbing a snack and settling in with Nestor Campos, Verde's in-house agronomic engineer and educational programs manager. For many students, the beauty of afterschool and summer learning is the opportunity to choose your focus, to be an active member of your education. Nestor is working with a group of young students on designing rain gardens. As the majority of his students speak Spanish as a first language, Nestor explains in Spanish (my high school Spanish and detailed pictures help me follow along) the elements of design such as measurement and placement of the rain gardens. A miniature house and garden in a Rubbermaid container are used for demonstration, and help captivate the students. Although not specifically for Cully Park, these rain gardens will be built at the homes of Cully community members to create environmentally sustainable rain water systems – another avenue Verde is using to enhance and build ownership in Cully.

By incorporating the voices and ideas of students, residents and community groups, Verde and its partners are tapping into local resources, creating pathways for authentic inclusion to transform and establish true community spaces. Years from now, when residents are watching soccer games, running or gardening in the park, they will be able to say "I had part in this." To learn more about "Let Us Build Cully Park" visit their website [here](#).

