

Macaulay Park Reopens as Tenderloin Kid Haven

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A San Francisco urban park, once infamous as a drug gallery and open-air toilet, was rededicated yesterday as a children-only playground, complete with plastic choo-choo train and iron fence.

City officials pledged never again to let Sgt. John Macaulay Park in the Tenderloin fall into squalor and decay.

"What is truly beautiful about a park is not what gets built there but what happens there," said Elizabeth Goldstein, general manager of the city Recreation and Park Department. "What was horrible about this place is all those beautiful moments were chased away."

The park used to be an open space with benches, but had no play equipment. It is now off-limits to all adults who are not accompanied by a child under 12.

Police from the Northern Station said they will keep an extra-diligent watch on the park, which is named for a popular sergeant who was shot to death making a traffic stop in 1982.

The new swing sets and jungle gyms, paid for by a \$620,000 grant from the city Open Space Committee, are representative of a gradual demographic change in San Francisco's toughest quarter.

Once the home of cheap hotels for itinerant merchant seamen, the Tenderloin in recent years has become a starting place for immigrant families with children, mostly from Southeast Asia.

There are now an estimated 3,500 children in the neighborhood, who exist uneasily alongside the neighborhood's human tableau of crack dealers, homeless alcoholics and



MICHAEL MALONEY / The Chronicle

Kids from the Tenderloin Childcare Center played on the newly constructed playground at Sgt. John Macaulay Park.

recent parolees. An adult theater directly across the street from Macaulay Park advertises a "Live 2 Girl Show" on its marquee.

City officials hope the reborn park will serve as a psychological detergent for the surrounding blocks, in much the same way that new family housing projects at 111 Jones St. and 211 Turk St. have helped change the unsavory character of their respective corners.

Also, some of the hard-core homeless of the Tenderloin seem to have a certain street-level morality about keeping illegal activity away from youngsters, said Midge Wilson, executive director of the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center.

"There's a respect for childhood here," she said.

Sgt. John Macaulay Park first opened in 1983 among hopeful intentions that the fifth of an acre at O'Farrell and Larkin streets would become a Tenderloin oasis.

Instead, it turned into a bazaar for prostitutes and drug dealers and a convenient place for some to urinate. A colony of rats made a home under the soil and began to invade an apartment building to the west on O'Farrell.

City officials closed the park in 1995 for a rat-extermination project. It was supposed to be a temporary closure, but neighbors detected an immediate drop in petty crimes and successfully lobbied the city to shut the gates permanently. Twelve years after its dedication, Macaulay Park had become a liability rather than an asset.

The drive to reconstruct the park began almost as soon as the gates closed. The Bay Area Women's and Children's Center and Sgt. Macaulay's colleagues from the Northern Station took the lead and began to lobby the city's Open Space Committee for the necessary funds.

"It took five years to get here, but it was worth every step," said Mayor Willie Brown, on hand for yesterday's dedication, in which children cut a construction-paper ribbon. "I wish I could claim credit for all of it, but I can't. Just a tiny bit."

The renovation replaced almost every square inch of the old park. Among the few remaining elements are two flowering pear trees near the entrance.

"It's going to be nice to have a place to take these kids," said Nancy Quintara, a teacher at the nearby Tenderloin Childcare Center, as she watched a 4-year-old girl in her care pretend to steer the play train.

Jeanette Macaulay, mother of the late Sgt. Macaulay, likes what she sees.

"John would have been proud," she said.

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