
Urban Sociology in Union Square and the Sunset Districts

For this project, I chose to study Union Square from the trolley turnaround to the square, and then into Macy's, I decided on that path because it has a lot of historical significance and acts as the heart of the city. The other area I visited was the Inner Sunset. To get a good feel of the neighborhood, I got in a car and got dropped off on a random corner in the neighborhood. I brought my boyfriend Cristian with me and we started at the corner of 19th Avenue and Judah and walked down to Irving where we took a right and kept going until just before 9th Avenue. I wanted to walk around and study these districts because I find them both to be very San Franciscan in their own way. Powell for example has a large memorial in the center, and borders many important historical and economic districts. The Inner Sunset was nothing but sand dunes, but you couldn't tell by looking at it now! They share some similarities like being popular with pedestrians and having public transportation nearby. Besides, they are both places that I rarely spend any time, so I wanted to know more about them. To try and understand what makes the interactions with people in these neighborhoods different, I conducted some historical and demographic research, and (like I mentioned above) walked the streets to make field observations. I talked to people in the neighborhood, I ate, walked, walked, and took notes, videos, and pictures. Through all this data collection, I was able to better understand why these places are significant to the larger culture of the city and how they remain unique. Research I want to dive a little bit into the history of these neighborhoods before we start to evaluate them.

Let's start with Union Square because it is a was developed first. In 1849, Col. John White Geary, an anti-confederate and veteran of multiple wars, donated the land to the city to use as a public park. Geary was originally from Pennsylvania and migrated to the San Francisco Bay after the Mexican War. In 1848, he visited President Polk and as a war hero, was granted a plot of land and the title of Postmaster for the growing city. In 1850 he was elected mayor and served for a single term, after which he left San Francisco never to return (Richards). Now, Geary Street borders the park and is a major street bringing workers and shoppers in from as far as Ocean Beach into the downtown area daily. At the time he donated the land, the square was three acres of dunes, as much of the now bustling metropolis was. The Gold Rush was in full-swing then and a great migration to the city had exploded the population in a very short time. This growth outpaced development and many people were living in tents and shacks. The square would be leveled in 1855 when it was designated a public park and became a popular spot to play baseball since there was no risk of property damage. This is apparently where the term "sand lot baseball" came from. The area was named about five years later, likely because pro-Union rallies were held in the park (Hartlaub). As the city developed, Union Square became a popular recreation spot for middle-class residents, then an upscale residential district, and then the Union Square as we know it sprouted roots for the first time. City of Paris, a popular department store rented the first two floors of a building at the corner of Stockton and Geary in 1896. In 1903, the large monument that still marks the center of the square was erected as a tribute to Admiral George Dewey and his defeat of the Spanish fleet in the Spanish-American War (Hartlaub).

One year later, the Saint Francis Hotel was completed, and then the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed most of downtown. There was a massive building effort and according to a 1906 New York Times article, the Saint Francis Hotel was the first building to be rebuilt in San Francisco.

Amazingly, the hotel promised all its profits to the city for “the future improvement of the park” (sfmuseum.net) The square and surrounding area were developing into a lavish, high-end shopping and entertainment district. Saks, Macy’s, and a homegrown upscale department store called I. Magnin dominated the district (Hartlaub). The area was immensely popular, it had benches lined end to end all the way around the pathways that crisscrossed the park. In the 30’s, flower beds were installed, as well as the palm trees still mark each corner (Nuno). The area remained this way until, in 1940, the square was renovated to add a parking garage below the park. This allowed cars to access the area and find parking. Today, the shopping district around the square that stretches down Powell Street and onto Market Street where it meets the Westfield Mall keeps the area very busy. As does the historic tourist attraction of the cable cars, as well as an intersection of public transportation from all over the city and the larger Bay Area. I could go on, but I think we now understand some of the forces that shaped what the square is today. Now, let’s look a bit at the Inner Sunset district.

While the downtown area was developed immediately in all the excitement of the Gold Rush, the Sunset took a while before it became a glimpse of what it is today. After the area was purchased and became part of the city, it was known as the Outside Lands. There is a yearly festival of the same name that I can hear from my window as I write this. This name was quite accurate around the 1880s as it was far removed from the busy heart of the city and, much like Union Square early in its existence, it was dominated by sand dunes. The land had interest and buyers began snatching up lots, though it remained mostly undeveloped until just before the dawn of the twentieth century. In 1889, the area gained its name and has since been known as the Sunset (Wong). Once people began to move out to the area, it was a rough go at the start. There is a small pub that opens on Lincoln Avenue in 1893, The Little Shamrock, that still serves up creamy Irish coffees and is the second oldest bar in San Francisco (Harrington). In 1894 the city hosted the California Midwinter International Exposition and brought thousands of people into the area creating the foundation for the new park-side neighborhood (McFarlane). One of the curious things about this immensely successful fair is that just five years later, the area is struggling to survive. Residents have no street lights and need to buy water brought into the neighborhood on a mule drawn sled. There is also no police protection or fire services (Sunset District 1900). It was neglected for some time until the residents successfully petitioned city hall to provide them with much the needed services. Growth continued at a slow and steady pace until the 1906 earthquake displaced many people downtown and the area became more attractive as a residential development away from the city. Public transportation spread out into this area providing an ease of movement in and out of the city center. By the 1920s, developers were beginning to construct whole blocks at a time crating a true suburb and near edge city decades before the practice became widely practiced. They sprouted more naturally, however, providing services centralized around transportation areas and surrounded by housing. By the 1970s, the entire area had been developed and looked much like it does today (Ungaretti).

The area is now home to many urban professionals, students, immigrant families, and elderly and has a thriving community. Fieldwork Now that we have uncovered some of these neighborhood’s fascinating history, we can start parse out some of the symbolic interaction, or the subtle communication that happens between humans and their environment as well as each other which was developed and coined by a Chicago School sociologist named Herbert Blumer, to think about what symbols are created and remain visible to change the social environment in unique ways. Again, let’s start with Union Square. When you visit the square there are some interesting detail you will notice immediately, namely the large-scale architecture from long before. Some of the buildings mentioned in the section above remain to this day and act as a

street wall enclosing the square and making it an outdoor room. These include Edwardian age beauties like the Saint Francis along with the Flood Building on Market Street that faces the tourist attraction of the cable car turnaround. These environmental symbols help connect the past of San Francisco in the forefront of its visitors and resident's minds. Having them so well taken care of and restored gives the people there a sense of pride in the city. They are proud to show it off to visitors and it is an enjoyable place to relax with friends, meet for a drink, and do a little shopping. The constant flow of people makes the area nice for people-watching. The BART, MUNI, and cable car keep the area packed with people at all hours, but it never feels too overwhelming except when there are large parades and festivals which can bring millions of people into the small area.

Because of all this organized chaos and the upper-class shoppers, residents, and foreign and domestic tourists, there are many opportunists including buskers, street performers, panhandlers, and thieves all attempting to capitalize on the healthy economy of the area. The upscale environment makes the people that visit it want to put on a mask and participate in what sociologist Erving Goffman called dramaturgical perspective. This is the idea that "all the world is a stage" and that people act through their whole lives. It displays itself here as an air of superiority as everyone knows this area is really for rich people which is also an example of how the theory of the looking-glass self works. Since everyone knows the area is for the rich, people act richer than they are while they are there, they are tempted by the variety of place to spend their money, perhaps on occasion more than they can really afford because of the social pressure to conform. When we move into the Sunset district, we see some of the same ideas, but here the symbols are different so people act differently than the large shopping district. Out there, people don't walk very fast.

Some have children or dogs. There are elderly people, young families, and people of middle age, unlike the bustling downtown area that is popular with young or middle-aged people who are more likely to be single and without families. This area's human symbols tell us that these people require more space because they have families. They are also more permanent as the larger space allows them to stay put for longer. As the high cost of rent pushes students out of the downtown area, many live in roommate situations in these SF suburbs. Skewing the demographic data to be younger in recent years (Statisticalatlas.com). There are noticeably smaller sidewalks compared to Union Square which reflects the area's reduced need to accommodate so many pedestrians. It also acts as a node where commuters come from the Parkside and Laker Merced area can come to visit the park or travel into the center of the city using public transportation. There are gas stations and the streets are much wider giving more precedence to the cars than the people. At 19th Avenue, each direction of traffic is allotted three lanes and there is parking on either side. The mixed-use nature of the neighborhood where housing units occupy the top floors of buildings while shops occupy the street level. This keeps the area from being a desolate car-centric area like much of what we consider urban sprawl where no one can walk to anything and entire areas are blocks of usage. These subtle differences between the districts create very different urban environments and thus affect the way people interact with each and the world around them. For example, while I was walking around the Sunset, I could talk to strangers in bars, shops, and on the street with very little effort. Everyone seemed happy and laid-back just willing to share the beautiful day and the exciting neighborhood.

In Union Square by contrast, not a single person engaged in spontaneous conversation and most averted their eyes at any eye contact. This is very easily attributed to the symbols of each

area. Union Square is a temporary place where most people do not spend extended amounts of time and the Sunset has more community engagement. Analysis Now, I have already touched on some sociological concepts and theories I found were present in each of these neighborhoods, but there are three in particular that I think best illustrate the interactions that occur within them - environmental cognition, environmental psychology, and new urbanism. Along with the looking-glass theory and the dramaturgical perspective that are present in Union Square, environmental cognition, a concept developed by Gary Moore that explains how our environments shape and are shaped by our own mental constructs of our environment. A mental construct is basically the culmination of all of your past experiences that inform your ideas about the world around you. We all know Union Square is for higher-end clientele because we have seen what the cost of items are at places like Saks, or Neiman-Marcus, or Tiffany's. This helps us place it in a frame of reference. This then affects the environmental psychology, or how behavior in these areas is affected by subtle changes. For example, the trash cans in Union Square don't look like they do anywhere else in San Francisco. They are neat looking boxes that have a mailbox-style opening that ensures they cannot be over filled. This keeps the area looking tidy and makes it impossible for people to dig through them and leave trash scattered across the area, a form of deviance or a deviation from the established social norm. Most people, no matter where you come from would not find digging around in a public trashcan to be "normal" behavior. This is not as much of an issue in the Sunset since there are less people there overall. The area is also more residential, with street facing windows so people can watch over what happens outside. The casual attitude is also reflected by the unpretentious architecture and the graffiti murals that lie alongside mundane features like a dentist office.

The last concept that I think best applies to these two distinct areas is new urbanism. The reason these areas are so desirable to live in and enjoy on the weekends is that they are organized around the basic tenements of this concept. Brought into the spotlight by Jane Jacobs, this idea for the organization of urban environments was centered on the idea that we need to return to the old ways of building cities that focuses on mixed-use neighborhoods and the pedestrian as its prime target. San Francisco's small size and early attention to the importance of public transportation ensured that only upkeep and updates were needed to allow the transportation systems to grow to accommodate the explosion of population. This city is very bike and pedestrian friendly by necessity because it is limited in size by the water that surrounds it on three sides. Besides, much of the city was built in the original organizational patterns that Jacobs found so fundamental to the health of the urban environment. Today, these ideas are being pushed further in other areas of the city like the Salesforce Transit Center that opens its doors to the public this weekend. It features a pedestrian walkway that is elevated and meanders through a park on the roof of the structure. Below, there is public transportation that exits into the what has become a tech-centered business district. Conclusion After spending some time walking around these neighborhoods observing and talking with the people that frequent these areas, as well as doing some historical research, we were able to make some interesting overall observations and learn more about how people shape the environment and then ultimately shape themselves and their thoughts, interactions, and ideas. I learned that though these areas seem different there is much they have in common. Adequate public transportation, mixed-use buildings, a variety of demographics in terms of age, income, and race make these places interesting and enjoyable to the people they serve.

The degree of community involvement is affected by how these interactions play out, where Union Square is more focused on the global market and appealing to as many people as

possible with the stores and entertainment offerings of the area, the Sunset is more community focused with small business, schools, churches, and longtime residents. This research and observations have uncovered some universal truths about what people like about their environment, what is desirable in a neighborhood, and what people tend to avoid. I hope you have learned something from this essay and can begin to look at your own favorite place and begin to determine what it is you like about them, so we can create a more enjoyable urban environment for the future.

eduzaurus.com