

**'More Than Just Parks':
The Isla Vista Recreation & Park District, 1972-1998**

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There is a common perception that the Isla Vista Recreation and Park District was a product of the riots in Isla Vista in the winter and spring of 1970. To some extent, that is true. The student disturbances of the late 1960s and early 1970s focused the attention of Santa Barbara County and the University of California on Isla Vista for the first time in many years. The County and the University were forced to take seriously Isla Vista and its problems – in large part the result of poor planning and neglect by both institutions.¹ But the decision of Isla Vistans to create a recreation and park district, and that district's ability to survive and even thrive over the next 26 years, was not an automatic nor obvious one.

The inter-related histories of Isla Vista and the IVRPD prompt many questions: of all the institutions, organizations, and committees established to address the community's ills after the riots, why did the Park District survive when others failed? What was it about the District, the people who served on its board and worked as its staff, and the Isla Vista community that made the IVRPD the only elected body in I.V. to this day? What does the history of the Park District tell us about the community of Isla Vista, and vice versa? Only by examining the history of the IVRPD and putting it within the context of post-1970 riot Isla Vista, can these questions be answered.

It appears from the evidence that a combination of factors shaped the Park District, making it the institution it is today. The environmental movement and the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s were key elements in the community's decision to create a special district to address Isla Vistans' need for recreation and open space. An alternative philosophy of work and gardening and landscaping methods predominated at the Park District long after those ideas and trends had died out in Isla Vista and elsewhere. A park district devoted to cultivating native

¹ Daily Nexus, May 18, 1979, p. 10, "Isla Vista Government: A child born of the riots".

grasses and flowers, preserving open space, and building volleyball courts was also considerably less threatening to the economic and political rulers of the area than a city government with taxing authority and control over the police.

In addition, the institutional structure of the IVRPD as a special district with taxing and other powers to regulate property, a board of directors who sit as elected officials, and the specific mission of providing parks and recreational facilities have greatly facilitated the District's ability to survive other community organizations. The legitimacy of standardized elections has helped the District outlive other organizations, such as the appointed Isla Vista Municipal Advisory Council, and the Isla Vista Community Council which, although elected, was chosen in non-traditional elections in which any I.V. resident over the age of 16 could vote. Elected IVCC members were automatically appointed by the County to the IVMAC, which was an advisory body, whereas the IVRPD is independently elected and managed by Isla Vistans without County or University supervision.

The Park District's status as the only elected body in Isla Vista has also made it a lightning rod for politics both within and outside the community; the intensity with which Isla Vistans engage in the political process has impacted the IVRPD enormously. In large part the story of the IVRPD is the story of Isla Vista, a community struggling with both change and continuity. In the 1970s some Isla Vistans tried to build an alternative community, and much of the IVRPD's history since 1972 has been a story of the struggle to maintain those alternative traditions while simultaneously dealing with the fact that much of the community and the outside world have abandoned those values.

In arguing that culture, institutions, and politics were the key factors in shaping the Isla Vista Park District, this study will discuss the history of the IVRPD since its establishment in 1972. It is broken into eight chapters that cover

three themes: the first details the creation of the District and its development in the 1970s into an important institution in Isla Vista despite numerous political setbacks and fiscal hurdles. The second section examines major land purchases by the District and its development of the park system that exists in I.V. today. The final section looks at the activities of the District outside of parks and recreation – symbolized by its slogan "More than Just Parks" – and focuses on the internal institutional culture of the district, the external politics it has engaged in, and the impact of these political decisions and actions.

People in Isla Vista have long had an acquisitive, entrepreneurial and sometimes exploitive relationship with the land. A walk or bicycle ride through I.V. today (one should avoid driving, if possible) reveals a community of about 16,000 within a half square mile, a density which residents almost proudly announce "is the most densely populated West of the Mississippi."² Isla Vista is an unincorporated district of Santa Barbara County next door to the University of California at Santa Barbara. As a student-dominated community, it is filled with apartment buildings and duplexes, fraternity and sorority houses, and houses that would appear to be single family homes but for the half dozen cars parked in front that clearly indicate renters. Many of the buildings are old, though some of them are new or newer; most range in appearance from ugly to unattractive to unaesthetic, although there are a few architecturally interesting structures, mainly in the far northwest part of town. The structures are built

² "Numbers Add up to a Myth About I.V. Population," May 30, 1995, 93106, UCSB's staff and faculty newsletter article. Isla Vista's density depends on the number of people per square mile, however there is conflict between various measuring agencies as to I.V.'s size and population. The 1990 U.S. Census Bureau grants I.V. a population of 20,395 within 2.1 miles, which would give it a density of 9,712, which is not even the densest in California. Santa Barbara County housing department and the IVRPD do not include UCSB, its housing areas, and Francisco Torres to be within I.V., which the Census does. The county and park district define I.V. to be 346 acres, or .54 square miles, with a population of 14,016, for a density of 25,956 people per square mile, which would be the densest community west of the Mississippi.

closely together, on narrow lots, and on tight streets, which have frequent dead ends or do not run entirely straight.

Isla Vista has a small business district made up of eateries and service stores that cater to students and other young people centered in the downtown area, or "the Loop" of Embarcadero del Norte and Embarcadero del Mar as well as Pardall Road. Nearly 24 hours a day I.V. residents can choose from three pizzerias (and two pasta eateries), three sandwich shops, four Mexican food places (only one is a true sit-down restaurant), two Chinese (and one Japanese) food restaurants, and six cafes/breakfast spots. There are three grocery stores, seven clothing shops and hair salons (two of three of the clothing stores also serve as head shops), two photocopy service stores, one Laundromat, two bike shops, one surf shop, and one pet fish store. There are also a couple of pool halls, two video stores, a tattoo parlor, and two bars. All the restaurants in town, in addition to the three liquor stores and food markets, sell alcohol. There are about a half dozen realty and/or property management businesses located in Isla Vista, although many I.V. rental property owners have their offices in the greater Santa Barbara area. There is no hardware store, no gas stations, and significantly, no banks (although there is now two Automatic Teller Machines).³ Business turnover is so high that this list has to be offered to the reader with the caveat that 'here today, gone tomorrow,' is the rule of I.V. business community.

Although Isla Vista is generally perceived as a student community, close to half the population is not a student. There is a retirement home for the elderly, Friendship Manor, at the edge of town on El Colegio and Los Carneros. There are also two very different residential sections of families, the R-1 or West End, filled with middle-class single family homes on the 6800 blocks, and a densely

³ Michel Nellis, "A Profile of Downtown Isla Vista," paper for History 216C, UC Santa Barbara (unpublished, Summer 1987).

packed Latino section of town, concentrated in the 6600 blocks of Picasso and Abrego Roads in the neighborhood of Children's Park. Interspersed between the apartments and businesses are the properties of the Isla Vista Recreation and Park District, which range from fully developed parks to dirt lots left as natural open space.

Although most of the development of Isla Vista occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the physical layout of the town was established in the mid-1920s. In 1925 and 1926 three groups of developers subdivided the half square mile area that now makes up Isla Vista into 25-foot wide lots for the beach front property and 50 by 100 foot lots for the rest of the area. All three – John and Pauline Ilharreguy, the Moody sisters, and two lawyers, Alfred W. Robertson and James R. Thompson – intended to sell the lots as shares in an oil development/seaside lifestyle plan in which the lot owners would divide the profits from oil production. The idea appears to have been that purchasers would build houses on the residential lots and also have oil wells on their property. The name Isla Vista, poor Spanish for 'Island View,' came to be applied to the entire area, although it was the name for only the Ilharreguys' 157-acre subdivision on what is now the 6600 and 6700 blocks of I.V.⁴

The Ilharreguys were the first settlers in Isla Vista, buying their land in 1915 for \$100 in gold, and doing much of the initial platting and naming of roads. They drew 40-foot wide streets through their property, the minimum width allowed by the County, and gave them Spanish sounding-names that when translated make little sense or are unusual, to say the least: Del Playa ('de la playa' is correct Spanish for 'of the beach'); Sabado Tarde, 'Saturday afternoon';

⁴ The early history of Isla Vista can be found in Jennifer Hildreth Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community: Isla Vista, California, 1925-1975* (Ph.D. dissertation, UCSB, June 1994), and Jennifer Hildreth Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town, Isla Vista, California, 1915-1968" (MA thesis, UCSB, 1987).

Trigo, 'wheat,' and Pasado, 'overripe' or 'rotten' (the Ilharreguys probably meant Pasada, or 'passage'). The Ilharreguys also built three access roads that ran from the frontage road (now El Colegio, 'the College'): Camino Corto, Camino del Sur, and Camino Pescadero.⁵

The two lawyers, Thompson and his partner Robertson, who later as a Santa Barbara Assemblyman would be instrumental in bringing Santa Barbara State College into the UC system and then moving it from the Riviera and Mesa campuses to Goleta's Coil Oil Point, developed their section in 1926, naming the area that now makes up the 6500 block of Isla Vista 'Ocean Terrace.' They laid out the loop of Embarcadero del Norte ('North Wharf') which is actually south of Embarcadero del Mar ('Ocean Wharf'). The attorneys also ended Pasado at the Loop and named the connecting street Sevilla, now Seville, and continued to name all the streets in their section after Spanish cities and artists – Madrid, Cordoba, Segovia, Picasso, El Greco, and Cervantes. They also intended interestingly that the center of the loop be used as an athletic field. The last group of subdividers, the four Moody sisters, owned what is now the 6800 block, and called their section Orilla Del Mar, or 'Edge of the Sea.' Their chief contribution was the construction of an ocean-view park on Del Playa.⁶

Although the town was laid out with streets and street names by 1930, the first Isla Vistans actually built only a handful of dirt roads, the rest were just streets on paper registered with the County.⁷ In addition, the community received few sidewalks, because builders did not have to build sidewalks unless surrounding dwellings had them. The result was that Isla Vistans spent much of their time walking in the streets, as they do now.⁸ Although a few lots were sold

⁵ Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town" (1987), chapter 1.

⁶ Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town" (1987), chapter 1.

⁷ Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town" (1987), chapter 1.

⁸ Daily Nexus, Monday, June 21, 1993, p. 5, "Where the Sidewalk Ends".

and some oil was discovered, there was never the big strike that would have transformed Isla Vista into the booming oil resort town its original planners had envisioned. By the mid-1930s many unsold lots were deeded to the state in lieu of owed taxes.⁹

What ultimately made Isla Vista grow from less than a hundred residents in the late 1940s into a community of more than 16,000 in 1998 was UCSB. In 1954 the University of California decided to buy an abandoned Marine Base at Coil Oil Point and move its most recent acquisition, Santa Barbara State College, from its campuses on the Santa Barbara Riviera and Mesa to Goleta, and then in 1958, to make the affiliated college into a general UC campus. Also in 1954, the 190-member Isla Vista Improvement Association received from the County a zoning ordinance that allowed at least one duplex on any lot, including the 25 foot wide lots in the beach zone. I.V. was zoned R-2, two family residential, between Del Playa and Sueno in the 6600 and 6700 blocks and between DP and Trigo on the 6500 block. The Orilla Del Mar tract was also zoned R-2. The rest of I.V. was zoned R-4, meaning multiple residential. The Loop area was designated commercial.¹⁰

The combination of the University locating to Goleta and this zoning plan helped ensure that Isla Vista would have a density that rivaled large Eastern cities. The final ingredient was an entrepreneurial attitude on the part of Isla Vista's landowners. Although approximately 500 people owned property in Isla Vista, the community had already developed one of its long standing patterns that would shape its development: most of the owners did not live in town and considered their property as chiefly a financial investment. Because of odd shaped lots, owners regularly asked for variances from minimum building and

⁹ Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town" (1987), chapter 1.

¹⁰ Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town" (1987), chapter 2.

design standards, and the County Board of Supervisors routinely granted them. In 1967, Isla Vista was rezoned with the unique S-R designation, Student Residential, which provided for apartment buildings instead of houses, narrow streets, and less than one off street parking space per unit, based on the assumption that students were more likely to drive small foreign cars and motorcycles instead of large American vehicles.¹¹

By 1958, when UCSB became a general UC campus and its target enrollment jumped from the 1954 target of 2,500 students to 10,000 students, construction in I.V. exploded. In 1960, building permits totaled approximately \$250,000; in 1963, permits worth more than \$6.7 million were approved, and in that year alone, developers built 952 apartment units. By 1967, I.V. had 4,449 dwelling units, with the density varying from 5.2 to 55.7 units per developed net acre.¹² The architectural design regulations the I.V. Improvement Association had planned were never implemented, and in fact, most of I.V.'s development occurred during a period in which Santa Barbara County's design ordinances, one of the stricter in the state, were not enforced for Isla Vista. Because virtually all builders in Isla Vista had no intention of living in the units they constructed, and because university enrollment was growing by leaps and bounds as the Baby Boom generation entered college in the 1960s, Isla Vista became the place where UCSB students tolerated to live when there was not enough on-campus housing – and there never was – for the few years they attended the University.¹³

¹¹ Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town" (1987), chapter 2. The University Report of the Commission on Isla Vista (1970) (The Trow Report), states that in 1966 "A committee consisting of several developers and county officials drafted a rezoning ordinance for Isla Vista which included a reduction in the size of off-street parking spaces (on the assumption that students drive small cars and motorcycles), the combining of ocean lots to enable to building of larger apartment units, and a reduction in permissible side yards for the ocean lots," p. 65. This plan was unsuccessful.

¹² Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community* (1994), pp. 13-14.

¹³ Strand, "Evolution of a Boom Town" (1987), chapter 3.

In the 1950s and 1960s, this transiency was not perceived as a problem, since student-related troubles in Isla Vista were such things as public drinking, loud music and profanity, and unsupervised fraternization between the sexes, increasingly in off-campus fraternities. In the later 1960s the student culture began to change, and some of the community's problems changed with it. Some young people began to adopt a "beatnik" style of dress and socialization, while students of all types realized the benefits of living off campus, away from both University and parental supervision. Gradually "hippies" replaced the "beats," and by the mid-1960s a new student/youth culture separate and distinct from the mainstream culture began to develop at UCSB and in Isla Vista. Jeans and other casual dress, longish and unstyled hair, beards and bare feet became increasingly common. Alternative newspapers such as the Argo and later Probe, appeared in town, and the Red Lion Bookstore, the Magic Lantern Theater and Borsodi's coffee house opened in the late 1960s to cater to a growing counter culture and to provide meeting places and forums for artistic and political expression. Drug use, especially marijuana, and head shops became popular.¹⁴

The environmental movement and a new concern for ecology also emerged at UCSB and in Isla Vista first in 1967, with the ultimately successful protests of the University's plans to expand a connecting roadway through the Goleta Slough, and then with the January, 1969 oil blow out that spread thousands of barrels of crude oil along Isla Vista's beaches. Isla Vistans' concern for the environment and strivings to find ways to live more harmoniously with nature quickly became a key aspect of life in the community.¹⁵

But the UCSB/Isla Vista community only had the third element of the "Sixties" components of political activism, student protest, and counter culture.

¹⁴ Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community* (1994), chapter 2.

¹⁵ Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community* (1994), chapter 2 and chapter 3.

While campuses such as UC Berkeley had been charged with student activism since the 1964 Free Speech Movement, and civil rights and anti-war demonstrations made regular appearances at many other universities, UCSB and I.V. had been relatively quiet until nearly the end of the decade. In 1968 black students had taken over North Hall to protest institutionalized racism, and that same year campus left-liberals seeking connection to the growing anti-war and student movements organized a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society, just as that organization was imploding from internal political and ideological conflicts. But few students were involved in radical politics at UCSB, and there were no violent protests in the 1960s.¹⁶

Instead, the "Sixties" came to Isla Vista and UCSB in a big way on February 25, 1970 with 'Isla Vista I', the riot in which the Bank of America building burned to the ground, making Isla Vista famous (or infamous, depending on one's perspective). Students fought police in the streets of Isla Vista again in late April, and for a third time in early June, that time in response to court indictments of those accused of conspiring and burning the bank.¹⁷

From the beginning of the first riot, which emerged out of a combination of local University politics in a tenure case, Isla Vistans' frustration with perceived police harassment especially over narcotics, and anger at the continued escalation of the Vietnam War, parks and open space in I.V. placed a crucial role. Perfect Park was the only developed park in Isla Vista before the creation of the Park District in 1972, and neither the community nor the University owned the land on which Perfect Park was located. But since the riots of winter and spring, 1970, Perfect Park and other open spaces have been places to fight over in Isla Vista. Two park areas in particular were important staging

¹⁶ Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community* (1994) notes large number of students did not oppose Vietnam War until 1968.

¹⁷ Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community* (1994), chapter 4.

grounds for conflicts between police and Isla Vistans in 1969-70. With the beginning of the riots in February, 1970, police would gather at Perfect Park at the top of the Loop between Embarcadero Del Norte and Embarcadero Del Mar while Isla Vistans would collect across the street at Little Acorn Nursery, now Little Acorn Park. The historical significance of these plots, as well as the rest of the upper Loop has contributed to much of the passion Isla Vistans have shown in debating about how to use these properties.¹⁸

Another important space in I.V. before the development of the District's park system is the county-owned parcel, Isla Vista Sea Lookout Park. No other piece of property in Isla Vista better reflects the community's relationship with Santa Barbara County. Although now a beautifully developed ocean-front park developed by an internationally-renowned landscape artist, Lloyd Hamrol, in 1986, the property is still known to older residents by its informal and once de facto name, Dog Shit Park.¹⁹ For years, the land at the corner of Del Playa and Camino Corto was a weed patch used for what its local name implied. For much of the 1970s and 1980s, few I.V. residents would have been able to direct visitors to "Sea Lookout Park," but everyone knew where Dog Shit was. In discussing Isla Vista's need for a community park, I.V. riot investigator and sociologist Martin Trow noted the County's plans for that section of oceanfront land, as well as its inadequacies in meeting the needs of most I.V. residents. He wrote, "The county has set aside an area consisting of nine recently acquired ocean-front lots for use as both a park and a fire station, but this area is located among the single family houses in the western portion of the community."²⁰

¹⁸ Isla Vistans have debated creating a monument to peace and to those who opposed the Vietnam War for nearly ten years, and the IVRPD has a Monument Committee currently in the process of choosing a monument design and an artist.

¹⁹ I remember my surprise as an 18 year old freshman working for the student newspaper, the Daily Nexus, hearing then 3rd district supervisor Bill Wallace speak of "Dog Shit Park."

²⁰ Trow Report, pp. 39-40.

Besides Perfect Park and Little Acorn Nursery, there were also environmentally-oriented organizations active in Isla Vista in the late 1960s and early 1970s before the Park District was established, and it was these groups that laid the groundwork for the IVRPD. They provided I.V. with recycling beginning in the early 1970s and encouraged organic gardening and farming projects in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Park District has continued to practice the values first fostered in these ecological organizations in its park development. According to Strand: "The Isla Vista Eco-Center grew out of the Isla Vista Community Council's Ecology Commission.... It was the beginning of an Isla Vista attempt to be more environmentally aware and proactive than the mainstream society outside its borders and a harbinger of a greater environmental awareness that would come from the counter culture movement nationwide."²¹

The development of parks in IV has long been seen as a solution to many of the community's problems, in large part because of the high density of development in such a small area. In 1969 a UCSB student, Linda Bond, wrote what she called "Isla Vista Study 1969" in which she recommended that the University " fund a community service center where organizations such as JIVE and Switchboard could find a permanent home, abandon completely the concept of *in loco parentis*, and aid in the development of parks."²²

The riots the subsequent year revealed a community deeply alienated and hostile toward the major institutions surrounding it and within it: the University, the County, the police, and absentee property owners. Trow commented in his report to the University about the I.V. riots: "Although there are no public recreational facilities within the student community in the eastern sector of Isla Vista, residents have cleared several vacant lots for gardens, play fields and a

²¹ Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community* (1994), p. 195.

²² Strand, *Maximum Freedom and the Limits of Community* (1994), p. 116.

valley ball court. Such self-help projects demonstrate a strong desire for a community park and recreation areas."²³ But these de facto park areas were vulnerable because the residents did not own the land. Through the creation of the IVRPD, Isla Vistans would be able to own their own parks, and some hoped, control their community's destiny as well. This, then, is the story of that effort.

²³ Trow Report, pp. 39-40.