

THE ZEIT GIST

Welcome to Misery Park

Officials have spent years turning a park into a public space that doesn't want visitors

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Shinjuku's Kabukicho is among the world's largest adult entertainment districts, with thousands of bars and sex clubs providing a cornucopia of nighttime entertainment options.



A visitor to the new-look Okubo Park, in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward.

MONTY DiPIETRO PHOTO

It is not a quiet place -- kamikaze taxicabs rocket the narrow streets, a huge video screen blares scenes from the latest Koma Theater extravaganza and outdoor batting centers ricochet with the crack of aluminum smacking 100-km fastballs. Meanwhile, tucked away amid the debauchery and cacophony, up in the northwest corner of Kabukicho, is a 100-meter-long stretch of asphalt where neighborhood Japanese, Korean and Chinese teenagers sometimes meet to play pickup games of soccer and basketball: Okubo Park.

Some 18 months ago, city authorities decided Kabukicho needed cleaning up. So what did they do? They shut down Okubo Park.

The so-called "Kabukicho Renaissance" also involved police raids on area

clubs and brothels, with a significant number of foreigners rounded up for immigration violations. But the question remains -- why close Okubo Park, possibly the only place in the area where wholesome, community activity was taking place?

"The basketball and soccer playing was making noise," explains Kasuke Nihei of the Shinjuku Ward Parks Department.

"Sometimes the basketball playing began quite early in the morning," continued Nihei. "But probably the biggest problem with the park was people drinking alcohol there, and 'address unidentified' (a euphemism for homeless) people using the park to cook food and eat. The Kabukicho Shopping Center Promotion Association and a neighborhood residents' committee both complained about this, and so we closed the park."

The closure in October 2005 followed a series of initiatives which made the park less and less accommodating. Initially -- and this can still be seen in an on-site sign display board -- Okubo Park was a pleasant-looking place, with grassy areas, a row of hedges and a children's swing set. Through the 1990s, as the number of homeless increased, the playground and greenery were removed, and the surface was paved over, making it less comfortable for those who would camp there in cardboard boxes.

Maybe the city underestimated homeless people's capacity for misery, as a number of cardboard box dwellings remained. And so a tall perimeter fence was constructed and the park was closed to one and all from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. each day, mirroring nighttime access restrictions the city had implemented in nearby Nishi-Okubo and Koizumiya-gumo-kinen Parks. Forced to wander through the night, some homeless returned to repose in Okubo Park during the day.

Other denizens, according to a park resident who asked to remain nameless, were not homeless at all, but unemployed day-laborers, most of whom had cheap, dormitory-style lodging in flophouses but precious little money to spend on cafes or movie houses. People-watching in the park was about the only daytime pastime they could afford.

Alas, on Oct. 8, 2005 the city stopped opening the gates, hanging a sign informing that the park was "Under Construction." But through the fall, winter and following spring, it did not appear that any construction had actually taken place. One sunny day in the late summer of 2006, a group of teenagers decided they'd waited long enough, and hopped the fence into no man's land. They played ball there through most of the afternoon, until authorities arrived to chase them away. Shortly thereafter, construction began in earnest -- the city removed both the basketball hoops and backboards, and twisted hundreds of meters of barbed wire along the top of the perimeter fence. It was war.

But over what? After all, this was no Jardin du Luxembourg. It is small and noteworthy, due its proximity to Kabukicho sex clubs, for being downright sleazy at times. Japanese porn star Sally Yoshino claims to have lost her virginity there. But despite its shortcomings, it is about the only public space that Okubo residents have -- and doesn't "public space" mean that it belongs to the people, not the functionaries?

In late autumn 2006, in the twilight before supertime, I observed a lone teenager in the lobby of a Shokuan Dori apartment building, bouncing his basketball against the walls. At least he was trying to stay active -- probably many if not most of his former park playmates had long since retreated to their bedrooms, video games and the "hikikomori" social withdrawal syndrome that local governments are constantly pledging to fight.

"Unfortunately, a small number of people have created problems and we have to think about that," explained Nihei. "The Tokyo Metropolitan Government has a homeless support policy, but those in Okubo Park were very aggressive. In Toyama and Chuo Park, for example, they are more acquiescent. Of course it's sad though, and I strongly hope we can let young people use the park again, but at this point we have no target date for reopening."

That seemed to be the end of the story, until crews suddenly appeared in Okubo Park in December and hung a new sign, informing that "improvements" were being undertaken, and the park would reopen in January 2007.

There are several possible sorts of city parks. There are pretty ones, such as landscape or botanical gardens, which invite people to appreciate nature. Others are less ambitious, purely functional parks that might simply provide a place to sit and read or feed the pigeons. And then there are playgrounds or sports-oriented parks, with jungle gyms, basketball hoops -- or a petanque piste even (Okubo hosts a vibrant petanque association).

When the Okubo Park reopening day arrived, I was curious to see what sort of atmosphere the Shinjuku city government had made of this troubled public space after 16 months of consultation, consideration and construction.

Unfortunately for the neighborhood, it is an atmosphere of abject failure. This certainly isn't a pretty park: Not a single flower or blade of grass has been planted, the ground is still a patchwork of dirty asphalt, and four of the trees have been cut down. Neither is the park functional as a people's space. There had been some two dozen stone stools, but these have been removed, leaving not a single place to sit.

There is a complete strike out on sports as well; a pair of soccer nets that had occupied the center of the park are gone, and the basketball hoops and backboards remain absent. There are more than 20 signs posted now telling people what they can't do -- feeding the pigeons is prohibited, as is playing any musical instrument or raising your voice. I could go on. Shinjuku has built a park that doesn't want people.

I spoke once more with Nihei after the park's reopening, asking about the removal of the park's meager sports infrastructure, the removal of trees and all seating, and asking what sort of person the Shinjuku city government could possibly expect to use Okubo Park now. "We want everyone to use the park!" was the response.

In the week following the reopening, only a handful of homeless had taken up the invitation.

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