

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Cultivating Unity: The Changing Role of Parks in Urban America [Research and Debate]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1cg2m1fk>

Journal

Places, 15(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Bachin, Robin F

Publication Date

2003-07-01

Peer reviewed

Cultivating Unity: The Changing Role of Parks in Urban America

Robin F. Bachin

An urban park is useful in proportion as it is rural. The real, the only reason why a great park should be made, is to bring the country into the town, and make it possible for the inhabitants of crowded cities to enjoy the calm and restfulness which only a rural landscape and rural surroundings can give . . . all other objects must, in a great park, be subordinated to the one central, controlling idea of rural repose, which space alone can give.

— Charles Sprague Sargent, 1888¹

Charles Sprague Sargent's vision for the value of urban parks reflected some of the guiding principles that shaped park development in America in the middle of the nineteenth century. He highlighted the strong connection in American life between nature, quiet reflection, and civic virtue. The agrarian origins of the nation meant that American leaders, most notably Thomas Jefferson, linked a rural landscape with the very foundations of republicanism and democracy. According to Jefferson, political autonomy and concern for the public good emerged from the process of working the land and being an independent landowner. Therefore, a decentralized agrarian nation composed of yeoman farmers represented the best hope for fostering a virtuous republic. Yet while these agrarian ideals often translated into an anti-urban sensibility, they more often led to the integration of natural elements into town and city development.²

Indeed, America's earliest commercial centers incorporated open spaces into their plans. The squares of Savannah and Philadelphia, for example, provided sites for public gathering, and became places of social as well as commercial interaction among colonial-era residents. The Boston Common began as a pasture for sheep and cows in the seventeenth century, and soon became a site for militia drills, baseball games, open-air meetings, and festivals. The designation of these spaces as "parks" only appeared in the nineteenth century, with the new movement to design such public areas in a "natural" manner. As a model for such new urban parks, American landscape gardeners looked to the precedent of the British pastoral landscape, which was carefully designed to showcase "the natural" and to disguise the human role in shaping it. American parks, then, brought together the tradition of formal landscape design with the recognition of open spaces as sites of public gathering and recreation.³

A significant number of factors that shaped nineteenth-century park design also inform current discussions about American parks. For the last 150 years, park planners and advocates have highlighted a variety of functions parks could serve in shaping urban landscapes. These include

parks as an antidote to urban ills; parks as places of active recreation; parks as vehicles for promoting public health and sanitation; and parks as regional commodities and sites of shared civic identity. While the language used to discuss the significance of parks in American cities has changed over time, many of the conceptual issues and challenges park designers face have remained remarkably the same.

This article explores the history of urban park development in America to understand the foundations of park planning, but also to suggest ways that historical precedent might inform contemporary practice. By understanding the value planners and advocates have associated with urban parks in the past, today's park planners and civic activists may find strategies and goals that resonate with current audiences, politicians, and civic boosters.

Parks as Antidote to Urban Ills

The widespread development of urban parks in America in the middle of the nineteenth century reflected the nation's changing ideas about nature. The notion of the naturalist landscape as the basis for American park design, advocated by prominent park planners such as Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted, emerged at a time when many Americans were calling into question the meaning of nature and its function in American history. On the East Coast at least, rural life became romanticized in the middle of the nineteenth century in part because it was disappearing. With the growth of commercial farming, the rise of a market economy, and the movement from farm to factory, agriculture was losing its place as the defining feature of the American economy and culture. There was also the sense that the frontier as a defining feature of American life was "closing."⁴

With nature no longer associated with hard work and farming, it became romanticized as a lost world of republican values. Landscape painting became a dominant art form in this period, reflecting this nostalgia for a lost world. Painters like Thomas Cole celebrated "rural nature" as "an unfailing fountain of intellectual enjoyment where all may drink & be awakened to a deeper feeling of the works of genius & a deeper perception of the beauty of our existence."⁵

By the 1860s and 1870s many Americans began to see nature and the city not as antithetical to one another, but rather as complementary features of what historian David Schuyler has called a "new urban landscape." Park promoters, physicians, religious leaders, and social reformers

Opposite: Serenity and tranquility in urban parks. Washington Park in Chicago in the late nineteenth century. Photo courtesy of the Chicago Park District.



saw the benefits of combining the morality and spiritual uplift they associated with nature, and the refining influence of cultural institutions in cities. Urban parks would serve as an antidote to the disorder and materialism of city life. These reformers, then, drew a strong connection between morality, social order, and the physical shape of the city.

Many park proponents envisioned the park as the complete antithesis of the city, highlighting nature and subordinating the manmade to fully achieve moral and spiritual harmony with nature. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's Central Park in New York City was the first major attempt to bring the natural landscape into the city and remove the "contaminating" influences of the urban environment. Olmsted and Vaux's Greensward Plan brought a piece of the country into the city to serve the spiritual and psychological needs of city residents. In doing so, it made use of such design devices as extensive lagoons, curvilinear paths, and native shrubbery and tree plantings.

Olmsted wrote that the beauty of the park "should be the beauty of the fields, the meadow, the prairie, of the green pastures and the still waters. What we want to gain is tranquillity [sic] and rest to the mind."⁶ Yet untamed nature did not represent Olmsted's vision of the proper design for urban parks. Instead, he argued that nature had to be carefully constructed in order to foster the experience of tranquility. Olmsted believed in "the restorative

qualities of nature" to bring about this social order and harmony. For Olmsted, the "contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character" helped overcome the stresses of modern city life.⁷ Where the grid plan of New York was designed for efficiency and commercial growth, the curvilinear paths of Central Park shaped places for quiet contemplation and reflection. Simply by experiencing the order and tranquility of properly designed parks, argued park proponents, city residents would ascribe to an urban vision of civility that transcended the immediate park experience.⁸

Parks as Sites of Active Recreation

Yet quiet contemplation was not the only feature of urban park development. Many critics of large urban parks argued that these spaces did not serve the explicit needs of local communities and neighborhoods. Residents of crowded wards wanted public parks and playgrounds to meet their social and recreational needs, as well as to provide open spaces to relieve overcrowding and unhealthy conditions. Critics also argued that sites for active recreation, especially for children, were essential features of cities. Chicago reformer Jane Addams captured this concern with recreational play space when she touted the achievements of the playground movement at the turn of the century:



If there is to be any conflict as to which use shall be made of the land, there is no doubt at all in my mind that it should be decided in favor of the playgrounds. The adults can get almost as much good out of playgrounds as the children, while the children cannot get the good from the parks. If the grass and trees are to be carefully preserved the children must still be made to play in the streets.⁹

Addams explicitly rejected Sargent's notion that urban parks necessarily should be rural and promote quiet contemplation. Instead, her call for playgrounds reflected a growing movement among urban reformers to recognize the benefits of strenuous activity. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who linked the importance of play to advances in social psychology, was extremely influential in the playground movement. His recapitulation theory stressed the role of play in childhood development, arguing that as people advance through stages of life, they recapitulate the evolutionary development of the species. In this regard, play enabled children to replicate precivilized activities that aided cognitive development and moral character formation.

Other reformers highlighted the importance of play in the lives of children from the perspective of concerns over delinquency. Many playground advocates like Hall equated "wholesome" recreation with outdoor activity, especially in park spaces overseen by trained supervisors who helped

structure the experience. By providing parks and playgrounds, cities could combat the lure of "illicit" entertainment and counter the spread of juvenile delinquency.¹⁰ According to one politician, establishing "that environment which produces sound bodies and clean habits" would solve "the crime problem which confronts every large city."¹¹

Of course, the design of neighborhood parks differed significantly from that of large-scale parks. Neighborhood parks typically were rectangular, working with the existing plat plan of the city rather than subverting it. Because they were designed to promote active recreation rather than quiet contemplation, they usually featured symmetrical plans that differentiated the functions of each section from the others. Many small urban parks included swimming pools, wading pools, outdoor play apparatus, and large playing fields. They often also included a fieldhouse, composed of separate men's and women's gymnasias, reading rooms, a library, and a community meeting hall. Such buildings highlighted the larger civic role these parks were intended to play in bringing neighborhood residents together for shared activity and dialogue. Like earlier advocates, then, those who promoted small neighborhood parks saw parks as arenas of civic engagement; they just

Above: Neighborhood parks as sites of active recreation. Mark White Square, Chicago, circa 1910. Photo courtesy of the Chicago Park District.

differed in their views of how to promote that engagement, and what the best design options were for facilitating it.¹²

Parks, Sanitation, and Public Health

Scientific problem-solving also played a role in shaping the movement for parks in urban America. By the turn of the twentieth century, reformers and park advocates highlighted how parks might alleviate conditions of overcrowding, lack of ventilation, and improper sanitation that plagued urban America. This emphasis on reshaping the urban environment as a means of improving sanitary as well as social conditions resulted from the emergence of ecology as a science. Chemist Ellen Swallow Richards, among others, helped shape the notion of “human ecology,” which linked conditions faced by humans to their natural surroundings. Richards connected the study of human environments directly to efforts to improve sanitary conditions in cities. And she called for “municipal housekeeping” as a vehicle for urban residents, especially women, to promote sanitation in the city by cleaning streets, managing garbage and waste, alleviating the smoke nuisance, and promoting park development.¹³

The emerging field of sociology went even further by highlighting how changes in the urban environment could foster broader social reform. Sociologists believed that by scientifically observing urban life, they could understand the social, economic, and cultural factors shaping society, and formulate methods for social improvement. Progressive-era social scientists and urban reformers used density studies, crime statistics, and mortality assessments to identify the locations of the worst urban conditions. By mapping the physical geography of the city, reformers could identify areas of “pathology” and attempt to ameliorate their problems through management of the urban environment. Physicians, sociologists and politicians saw parks as one antidote to unhealthful cities. If parks served as the “lungs of the city,” investment in more such spaces throughout the city could improve the health of urban inhabitants.¹⁴

Moreover, many landscape designers linked the promotion of natural resource conservation directly with the promotion of parks in cities. Jens Jensen, for example, recognized the toll rapid urban growth was taking on the land and called for efforts to preserve it. Through these efforts to preserve the native forests and vegetation in developing urban areas, Jensen and other conservationists hoped to teach Americans to appreciate their regional landscapes. Urban park designers were also attracted to some of the ideas of forester Bernhard Fernow and conservationist George Perkins Marsh, who argued

that natural areas should be preserved for future generations, not exploited for the immediate gain of the few.¹⁵

Parks as Regional Commodities and Sites of Shared Civic Identity

In the first decades of the twentieth century park development also flourished in urban America as a way to sell cities. The rise of the City Beautiful movement at the turn of the century illustrated how commercial interests and civic concerns could go hand in hand. Municipal governments increasingly worked with merchants clubs and local improvement organizations to introduce comprehensive beautification plans on a regional scale. According to architect and planner Daniel Burnham, “Beauty has always paid better than any other commodity and always will.”¹⁶ For Burnham, beauty and financial prosperity were intimately linked. Beautifying American cities, argued Burnham, would attract visitors, promote the efficient flow of goods, and enhance the civic life of the city.

Parks were an essential feature of these beautification projects. Public parks became icons of cities, imprinting them with physical spaces that reflected the unique environmental and naturalistic features purported to connect the culture of a city to its locale. Parks fostered a sense of place and left indelible marks on visitors, who took away with them a lasting image of distinct urban environments. Well-designed parks became regional commodities that promoted tourism and economic growth by virtue of the unique qualities they contributed to the urban landscape. Boston’s Emerald Necklace, the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, the Mall in Washington, D.C.: these are all spaces that help define and give shape to their respective cities. World-class public parks came to be seen as a reflection of civic-mindedness and a testament to the degree to which a city valued the public good.

The process of setting aside park spaces in cities historically has reflected the provision civic leaders made for shared gathering and social interaction among residents. According to many advocates, the park was a site where boundaries separating groups could be erased. Coming together for shared experiences, whether quiet contemplation, recreational activity, or large public festivals, allowed a city’s population to see itself as united, to have a shared vision of civic identity. Frederick Law Olmsted, for example, believed parks could be places that fostered interaction among various classes of urban dwellers. This is why the promenade was such a central feature in all of his designs:



*[The promenade] is an open-air gathering for the purpose of easy, friendly, unceremonious greetings, for the enjoyment of change of scene, of cheerful and exhilarating sights and sounds, and of various good cheer, to which the people of a town, of all classes, harmoniously resort on equal terms, as to all common property.*¹⁷

Here, the inequalities so glaring in other parts of the city could fade away. The park provided a shared leisure space around which a vision of urban order and harmony could be structured.¹⁸

While Olmsted's view represented an idealized and hierarchical notion of how parks function, it nonetheless suggested important ways in which parks could foster a sense of shared civic identity by bringing people together in a central public space. This shared civic space allowed different ethnic groups to make use of local parks to express their heritage and traditions, but it also offered a place in which ethnic difference could be overcome. Daniel Burnham made this point to a group of businessmen in Chicago in the 1890s. "When a citizen is made to feel the beauty of nature," he argued, "when he is lifted up by her to any degree above the usual life of his thoughts and feelings, the state of which he is a part is benefited thereby. [Park planning] goes a long step toward cementing together the heterogeneous elements of our population."¹⁹

Burnham, like Olmsted, focused on the goal of unity as a central function of parks in cities. More recently, park

planners and urban activists have highlighted the recognition and celebration of diversity that urban parks make possible. In cities across the country, a variety of groups have used public parks to stage parades, heritage celebrations, rallies, and protests as a means of expressing their sense of ethnic, racial, religious, and sexual identity. Of course, park spaces (along with other sites of urban congregation such as public transit and marketplaces) have also become contested areas, where ethnic and racial tension may spark conflict and violence. Yet the ideal is that public parkland has made it possible for diverse groups within a city to lay common claim to land invested with civic symbolism. Creating and maintaining parks as essential features of the urban landscape not only added naturalistic and aesthetic dimensions to urban America, park planning also signaled the importance of shaping spaces of civic interaction that had the potential to transcend class, ethnic, and racial difference.

Trends Today

All of these aspects of park history are relevant to current discussions about the future of urban parks in America. They can be places of serene natural beauty; sources for improving public health, recreation opportunities, and

Above: Qi Kung and tai chi on the Mall in Washington, D.C., 1999.

Photo by author.

fitness; world-class attractions imprinting cities with distinctive signatures; and great civic spaces fostering shared community interaction and public engagement among the rich ethnic cultures that shape our cities. Yet park planners, designers, and grassroots advocates face difficult hurdles in preserving, restoring, and shaping urban parks.

While some cities, such as Boston, San Francisco, Portland, and Milwaukee, have invested in large-scale park planning projects, many more have witnessed the erosion of fiscal support for the maintenance, preservation, and creation of public parks.²⁰ Moreover, some city residents (as others have through history) today find their access to so-called public parks severely restricted. The creation of “bum-proof” benches designed to keep the homeless from sleeping in parks, increased surveillance using remote technologies, and the development of private parks in gated communities have all forced park advocates and urban planners to address the changing relationship between parks and public space.

As urban growth and commercial development continue to put pressure on public resources in American communities, politicians, commercial leaders, and civic boosters might do well to look back at the park planning that took place 150 years ago and consider all it has done to enhance our national landscape, sense of place, and commitment to civic engagement.

Notes

1. Charles Sprague Sargent, “Prospect Park,” *Garden and Forest* 1 (July 4, 1888), pp. 217–18. Sargent was the director of Harvard University’s Arnold Arboretum and one of the founders, along with Frederick Law Olmsted, of *Garden and Forest* magazine.
2. Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *The Portable Thomas Jefferson* (New York, Viking Press, 195), p. 217.
3. For further discussion of the formal and vernacular traditions of parks, see John Brinckerhoff Jackson, “The Origins of Parks,” in *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 127–30.
4. See Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920).
5. Thomas Cole, as quoted in David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 32.
6. Frederick Law Olmsted, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” *Journal of Social Science*, no. 3 (1871), p. 23.
7. Quoted in Anne Whiston Spirn, “Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted,” in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Retinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), p. 93.
8. For further discussion of Victorian notions of park design and moral uplift, see Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982); Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*; and David M. Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2002).
9. *Chicago Record-Herald*, June 1, 1902, Lincoln Park Commission Newspaper Clippings, Chicago Park District Special Collections.
10. Sophonisba P. Breckenridge and Edith Abbott, *The Delinquent Child and the Home* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1912), p. 157.
11. Galesburg, Illinois *Register*, July 27, 1903. South Park District Clipping Files, Chicago Park District Special Collections.
12. For further discussion of small parks as sites of active recreation and civic engagement, see Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*; and Robin F. Bachin, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).
13. See David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh, Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Carolyn Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); John Opie, *Nature’s Nation: An Environmental History of the United States* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998); and Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature’s Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
14. John H. Rauch, *Public Parks: Their Effect Upon the Moral, Physical, and Sanitary Condition of the Inhabitants of Large Cities; With Special Reference to Chicago* (Chicago: S.C. Griggs, 1869), p. 6.
15. Robert E. Grese, *Jens Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
16. Daniel H. Burnham, “The Commercial Value of Beauty,” reprinted in Charles Moore, *Daniel H. Burnham: Architect, Planner of Cities* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), pp. 101–2.
17. Olmsted, Vaux and Company, *Preliminary Report Upon the Proposed Suburban Village of Riverside, near Chicago* (New York: Sutton, Browne, 1868), p. 12.
18. See David Scobey, “Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York,” *Social History* 17 (May 1992), 203–27.
19. Quoted in Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, *Plan of Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993 [1909]).
20. For further discussion of current efforts at park planning and its role in enhancing urban environments, see Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Z. Melnick, eds., *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Paul S. Grogan and Tony Proscio, *Comeback Cities: A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival* (Boulder, Westview Press, 2000); and Richard Moe and Carter Wilkie, *Changing Places: Rebuilding Community in the Age of Sprawl* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997).