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The Invisible Park: Revitalizing the Ten Invisible Landscapes

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When I was growing up outside of New York City, I heard all about Central Park before ever going inside. From fiction I learned that it could be an enchanting place, as when Stuart Little dramatically steered his model boat to victory on the sailing pond. From old paintings I learned that it had once been a place of dream-like beauty. From movies I learned that it was a place of romance. Yet I also learned from newspapers and television that it was a bad place, filled with muggers. And the leaders of school trips to the Museum of Natural History told us that no one in his right mind would ever go there. Later, when I moved to New York City and began to explore the park on my own, my experience of it was shaped by these mythic qualities — its romance, forgotten dreams, mystery and intrigue, and also its looming danger.

Although I seldom get a chance to visit Central Park now, my sense of its invisible qualities has only grown richer and more powerful with time, built on hundreds of memories of its stunning renaissance. Thus, when a neighborhood boy's murder sparked us to form the Friends of Meridian Hill Park in Washington, D.C., in 1990, it was to Central Park that we turned for inspiration. Beginning with our efforts to rescue and revitalize Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park after years of crime and neglect, the Friends has now expanded into an award-winning citywide alliance of grassroots parks partnerships called Washington Parks & People. Taking on some of the most

crime-ridden, abandoned, and seemingly hopeless green spaces in the nation's capital, our goal is to cut crime by more than 90 percent and transform negative, empty spaces into positive, life-filled places.

Washington Parks & People's special focus today is the city's longest municipal park, Watts Branch. Few people realize that this stream valley that sweeps down into the Anacostia River is home to the longest-established urban African-American population. And a generation after its transfer from national to local stewardship, its signature park had become one of the city's most forgotten public spaces. When we began an intensive revitalization effort there in April 2001, most people said our task was hopeless. Yet, drawing on its invisible strengths, Watts Branch Park is already coming back to life in hundreds of ways. Today, it represents the city's broadest community park revitalization effort, involving nearly 10,000 volunteers and hundreds of public and private agencies, led by D.C. Parks and Recreation.

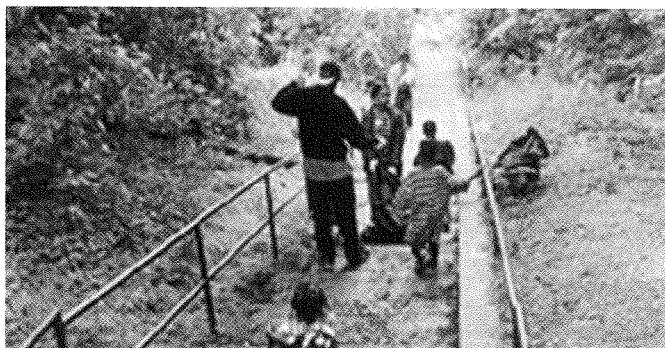
Much of Parks & People's success at such once-notorious parks such as Watts Branch and Meridian Hill has stemmed from our desire to pay as much attention to "invisible" landscapes as visible ones. We have found that effective and lasting revitalization depends on understanding and advancing the following defining features of urban parks.

I. The Landscape of Memory

History neither began nor ended with the designed landscape. Making the historic landscape resonate more universally for diverse non-users calls for broadened interpretive programs about the many pasts of the land. There are many stories that may be used as the basis for such programs: a park's enduring geological and natural character; its history of settlement before it became a park; oral histories, photographic displays, and retrospectives of people's experiences in it; recognition of important individuals who have played leadership roles; historic links between surrounding communities and the park; and explanations of how Native American, African, Asian, Latin, and European traditions and rituals are embodied in the evolution of its design and use.

Top: This overgrown hillside in Watts Branch Park was transformed from a frequent scene of violence into the Marvin Gaye Amphitheater. Photo by Cindy Godden.

Bottom: Children can be a great resource for turning a park around. Adults may become reinvolved when they see what children are able to accomplish. Photo of neighborhood children along the Watts Branch trail by Cindy Godden.



The most important interpretations of the past sometimes come from longtime park users. At Meridian Hill, a policeman who grew up around the corner and once got into trouble playing in its fountains told school groups how a horse-drawn watermelon cart used to stop there on hot summer afternoons. A former drug dealer who devoted the last years of his life to curbing violence explained how the police and community cracked an unsolved murder case there. And a Baptist minister who came to the park's Overlook regularly for fifty years opened people's eyes to gentle, watchful stories of its bird life.

Institutional resources can also be important. While some initially doubted that a blighted place such as Watts Branch Park might have significant heritage, the D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition is now helping with a broad-based effort to document its history. A major new greenway connection is also being planned to the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail.

II. The Landscape of Myth and Meaning

Perceptions of parks become reality. At places like Watts Branch and Meridian Hill, it took mountains of publicity about the eradication of crime, coupled with intensive programming, to bring people back. But turning a park's image and reputation around may not only reshape daily visitor use but also affect trends in nearby neighborhood investment, and lead to increases in public funding for planning, housing, community facilities and programs, transit, economic development, and a broader green infrastructure.

As a means of revitalization, there are numerous myths from a range of cultures that parks can tie into: the Pueblo, the Commons, the Village Green, the Piazza, the City Beautiful, the Emerald City, the Potowmack (gathering site), the Sacred Place, the Garden of Eden, the Secret Garden, the Enchanted Forest, the Tree of Life, the Fountain of Youth, the Zone of Peace. Yet equally important are local meanings that people draw from a park.

For decades, Meridian Hill's dramatic formal landscape had seemed aristocratic and removed from the concerns of most of its neighbors. But this began to change when the Friends of Meridian Hill adopted the motto "A Park for All People." We pointed out that what made Meridian Hill great was how it took design ideas from private gardens around the world and incorporated them into a multicultural public space. Similarly, we stood Meridian Hill's horrendous reputation as Washington's single most violent national park on its head by ensuring that every positive development there received media coverage, building different myths and meanings for it.

III. The Landscape of Imagination, Possibility, and Play

People come to urban parks with simple needs: rest, relaxation, recreation, and respite from the city around them. Good parks meet these needs, but they also respond to deeper yearnings, giving us ideas, hope, and a sense of possibility in our lives and communities. Successful parks offer far more than pretty things to look at: they are places where we show people that our dreams can come true. Created out of leaps of faith that often defy conventional wisdom (even Olmsted scoffed at the feasibility of creating San Francisco's Golden Gate Park on an expanse of windswept dunes), parks broaden our capacity to imagine and create a better future.

The key is often encouraging a rich variety of experiences. Meridian Hill was originally designed with such "pageantry" in mind. But when we began our work there, the original vision had been forgotten, and fear had replaced fun. Today a sense of wonder and surprise has regained its place. Children studying the wind stare in amazement at the long, twisting journey of soap bubbles as they blow off the hilltop. A fascinated homeless man, himself elaborately dressed, watches a costumed septuagenarian simultaneously dance and recite poems in five languages. Older park "alumni" — urban refugees, returning after a generation — are stunned to hear music floating across the park on summer evenings. People can once again fall in love, holding hands in places that were previously ruled by fear.

Inspiring people to believe in their dreams for parks, especially in unjustly forgotten communities, may begin with simple steps that transform the way they are perceived. Children can lead the way. Two years ago, at a time when most adults had given up on it, we asked the children of Watts Branch Park to share their dreams for the park. Today they are helping implement a ten-point action plan that is once again allowing adults to see the park's possibilities. Youth have led the way in park plantings, fairs, talent shows, parades, mural painting, service projects, classes, markets, and other programs. Against the odds, Watts Branch is emerging as a place where dreams come true.

IV. The Landscape of Hospitality

Long before and ever since Mr. and Mrs. Mallard struggled to find a safe place to nest (in Robert McCloskey's immortal children's tale *Make Way for Ducklings*), non-users of parks have stayed away because they did not feel at home. The far-reaching revival of hospitality called for by the theologian Henry Nouwen and others is especially relevant to the challenge of revitalizing urban parks.



The tests for hospitality in a space are straightforward. Are there indications along a park's boundary, such as banners and other signage, that outsiders are welcome? Is a park linked to its surrounding communities through greenway or streetscape connections? Is a park easily accessible to children, pedestrians, disabled people, bicyclists, and transit riders? Are the connections from the surrounding neighborhood planned with appropriate signage, crosswalks, and traffic lighting? Are entrances well placed, lit, and maintained? Are lines of sight open so that people feel sufficiently safe and enticed to venture in? Do activity nodes connect to nearby neighborhoods in ways that encourage involvement? Do people from different cultures and backgrounds feel welcome? Are they informed how their diverse needs, comforts and interests will be met? Are park users treated with dignity by ensuring that there are good places to sit, rest, get a drink, eat, and go to the bathroom? Is this a place where strangers will be made to feel at home? Are people made to feel that their enjoyment of nature and each other is a park's paramount experience?

V. The Landscape of Freedom

Community public places are the soul of a free society. It is perhaps no accident that the American Revolution began on a village green. Yet, some managers of historic park landscapes have attempted to severely constrain public use of these places in the name of preservation. Concerns about crime have also led to measures to restrict use. But these approaches often backfire by alienating the

very people for whom the landscapes were designed and who could best watch over them. With such innocent users driven off, many historic urban landscapes have been abandoned or taken over by criminal users. By contrast, creative park managers are finding ways to encourage innocent uses that actually help free parks from fear, violence, disruption, pollution, and decay.

Appropriate rules to protect our resources and basic respect for others are important, but good parks, more than anywhere else in a city, are places where we may be ourselves. Inside a good park, we feel free to run, play, frolic, love, laugh, cry, sing, mourn, celebrate, protest, honor the Earth, be alone, give a speech, paint a picture, dance, worship, perform a ritual, wear a strange costume, or do whatever suits our fancy.

On the same "play mall" at Meridian Hill where ball-playing and kite-flying were once banned by park managers (but where the city's largest open-air drug market flourished), Sunday afternoons now produce Breughel-like tableaux of people engaged in a multitude of activities. Meanwhile, in Meridian Hill's quieter niches, made safe by the throngs of people using the rest of the park, more solitary visitors are free to picnic, sunbathe, smell the flowers, kiss, read, write, meditate and nap — uses unthinkable thirteen years ago.

Above: Through their own initiative, the members of D.C. Park Savers have once again become heroes in their communities. Photo by Scott Lewins, Washington Parks & People.

Emphasizing freedom is especially vital in reaching out to multicultural neighborhoods where many come from places and times that were not free. One must appeal both to immigrants who may have come to the U.S. to escape oppression, and to African Americans whose grandparents and great-grandparents were so recently brought here against their will.

Violence poses special challenges to freedom in parks, both because fear closes down public places and because many traditional crime-fighting measures inhibit free use of space. In the wake of last year's sniper shootings, many Washington-area parks suspended their outdoor programming. Yet this was when we most needed parks to be free and alive with people looking out for each other. Even with massive increases in police budgets, vast sections of parkland will often be unpatrolled. Countering violence and building peace fundamentally depend on people getting to know each other, bridging differences, and establishing a sense of community in public places.

VI. The Landscape of Community

A good park must have a culture and spirit where one feels comfortable speaking to "strangers." Community is talked about a great deal, but far too few people really experience it, or understand how to build and protect it. A generation of community-illiterate Americans has been instructed to avoid venturing into inner-city parks, going outdoors in the evening, loitering, or speaking to strangers — yet these can be the very best ways to discover and build community.

Urban parks are vital to community-building because they are one of the few places where people from different backgrounds can come together in peace to meet, play, and learn from one another. As anyone knows who has attended an evening performance in a park, there is no more magical feeling of community bonding than being part of an audience serenaded together through sunset into early evening. At such a time we give ourselves permission to "loiter" long enough to connect to a place. Perhaps under these circumstances we may even break the cardinal prohibition against greeting strangers.

Washington Parks & People would not exist today if the initial night crime patrols we started at Meridian Hill had not been based on greeting everyone we met there. The first night, the first person we said hello to was a teacher and minister who became our founding chair. Simply getting to know people in a park and its surrounding communities helps build concentric circles of community: family, friends, culture, organizations, neighborhoods, city, region, national origin, and world.

Today, our commitment to community outreach takes a wide variety of forms: T-shirts, flyers, banners, walks, festivals, promotional campaigns, press coverage, and strategic alliances with hundreds of cultural, environmental, and community-service and -development organizations. But our initial message — a little corny perhaps, but powerful nonetheless — is the same: "hello."

VII. The Landscape of Cultural Expression and Understanding

There is no substitute in park management for organizing activities across cultural boundaries. Such activities bring us together to celebrate the differences that make us special. Washington Parks & People has adapted Native American, African American, Latin American, and pagan European rituals to seasonal celebrations. We have helped build regular diverse uses of the parks that link the landscape to people's lives through such activities as Latino and Caribbean soccer games, African drumming circles, Mexican and Indochinese dance practices, and morning Tai Chi classes.

We have nurtured broad religious support and involvement, including Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Muslim, Eritrean, Evangelical, Jewish, Lutheran, Quaker, Unitarian, and tribal spiritual ceremonies. We have partnered with hundreds of arts, culture, youth, social service, and community institutions to help them use parks as extensions of their facilities. And we have brought tens of thousands of new users into parks — many initially quite nervous — for such activities as volunteer gardening and service programs, jogging, picnics, singles events, and dog-walking groups.

Free "pageantry" is another tool we have used to make parks come alive. At Meridian Hill, our efforts have included more than one hundred concerts honoring "Worlds Coming Together at the Parks," cross-cultural and youth theater (inspired by the Living Stage and Cornerstone Theater Companies), dance performances led by the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, ceremonies honoring multicultural heroes, poetry from many cultures, African-American Civil War reenactments, Native American sunrise services, Lights of Hope fountain lighting, school graduations, weddings and memorial services, model boat regattas, and life-size chess tournaments. We even celebrated Joan of Arc's 580th birthday with the ghost of the Saint arriving in armor on horseback, along with a young girl portraying a modern-day Joan of Arc — Linda Brown, the seven-year-old whose courage led to the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregation ruling.

In the center of the most violent zone of Watts Branch



Top: Success restoring the visible, formal landscape of Meridian Hill has relied on understanding the park's invisible landscapes. Photo courtesy Project for Public Spaces.

Bottom: The "play mall" at Meridian Hill Park, where managers once banned such valuable community-building activities as pickup soccer matches. Photo by Andrew Wiley-Schwartz, Project for Public Spaces.

Park, we transformed a forbidding, overgrown hillside into the Marvin Gaye Amphitheater. After volunteers cleaned away the debris and weeds, teens made a sign, and flyers went up announcing a talent show. On the appointed day, all it took was an open microphone to make a dream of thirty years standing come true.

VIII. The Landscape of Learning and Enrichment

Frederick Law Olmsted understood the power of urban parks to enrich the lives of park users through a broad range of informal and programmed experiences. The National Park Service, the Student Conservation Association, AmeriCorps, city school systems, and community programs such as D.C.'s Robert Lederer Youth Gardens and Environmental Education Center have all developed useful models of parks as classrooms, laboratories, and places for service learning.

At Watts Branch, a site formerly known as "Needle Park" has been replaced by a center of youth education and programming called "Heritage Park." Here classes and groups of all kinds come to hear trained Urban Park Rangers and other community storytellers conduct daily tours.

In addition, community-development corporations and other agencies are now developing job-training programs in parks, and even exploring innovative programs for park concessions and related enterprises. Such organizations are clearly striving to make the park experience relevant to the needs of surrounding communities. Without sacrificing the historic integrity of parks, an important challenge today is to find ways for urban parks to serve as economic engines for depressed inner-city areas. In this way, increased public investment in parks can be justified as promoting broader community goals of safety, pride, revitalization and reinvestment.

Last summer at Watts Branch, on the former site of a major heroin market, a group called the Natural Leaders launched a new kind of market — a farm stand to sell produce grown in the park's youth garden. The farm stand helped drive drug dealers from the park and enrich life in a community that had not had a produce market in decades.

Possibilities abound in the parks for lifelong learning and enrichment. At Watts Branch, ex-offenders are learning job and life skills, working in a landscape restoration team they call D.C. Park Savers. Such older men are once again heroes and mentors in a community that needs both.

IX. The Landscape of Sustainability and Livability

Parks of all sizes provide a vital link between inner-city residents and the Earth. This connection is important for

advancing the sustainability, livability, and environmental justice of surrounding communities. Ecological restoration, resource economics, air and water quality, non-automotive greenway links, accessibility to active living, anti-sprawl measures, safety, and cultural vitality are key standards for identifying great places to live in the twenty-first century.

Parks are positioned at the center of all of these considerations. In a listing of the most livable cities in America, *Money* magazine used clean air, cultural institutions, and parks as evaluation screens. On the basis of these screens, it rated Washington, D.C., the most livable large metropolitan area on the East Coast.

Increasingly, there is evidence that our survival depends on parks. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control show a direct link between poorer inner-city communities and inactivity. If parks are made welcoming and safe, people living nearby may be able to increase their level of activity and avoid obesity and other health problems. More broadly, deeper daily connections to the Earth remind people how all life is sustained and made worth living.

X. The Landscape of Stewardship and Stakeholdership

*Whose woods these are I do not know
His house is in the village though.*

The "owners" of parks can no longer be like the unseen landholder of Robert Frost's poem. Public agencies and communities must work hand-in-hand as true co-owners of parks. Few people would dispute that the long-term future of parks depends on new and lasting roles for the public in planning, protection, programming, and philanthropy. Neighbors must become not merely involved, but invested in real opportunities to contribute to the lasting future of our parks.

Across the nation and around the world, we must ensure sound long-term financing and management of our parklands. But park leaders must also recognize that they are no longer merely agency managers or stewards of historic monuments. They are builders of major institutions that depend on and contribute to every aspect of community life. Like the plants and animals we nurture in the physical landscape, we must find ways to give new life every day to the dreams and invisible landscapes that make these places special and help sustain us. In so doing, we will set the stage for a physical landscape imbued with meaning and significance for generations to come.