

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Rethinking the Conservation of Urban Open Spaces

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62r2k5c6>

### Journal

Places, 10(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Howett, Catherine

### Publication Date

1995-07-15

Peer reviewed

# Rethinking the Conservation of Urban Open Spaces

*Catherine Howett*

There is a need for a deliberate and conscientious re-examination and questioning of the philosophical premises, principles and values that have informed the preservation movement worldwide. We cannot assume that current attitudes toward the conservation or rehabilitation of urban parks, squares and streets — the preservation perspectives that influence design decisions about what should be saved, discarded, or significantly modified for contemporary use — will continue to serve us well in the future.

Many familiar realities suggest the disintegration of old certainties. Familiar terms such as “heritage” and “cultural patrimony” have taken on added resonance within certain cultural groups at the same time that their meaning and implications have become more ambiguous. As communities around the world struggle toward a reaffirmation of historic identities based on race, religion, ethnicity or geopolitics, the social and institutional systems that previously ordered their lives in common with other groups have been assaulted and, in many cases, overthrown. This is as true at the neighborhood scale as it is for regions and nations.

Traditional ways of thinking about historic landscape conservation have largely failed to address the environmental crisis as it manifests itself in the urban centers of industrialized and developing nations. Problems of population growth and overcrowding (in other places, the debilitating loss of population), air and water pollution, the wholesale destruction of natural resources, famine, plague, poverty, crime, homelessness, illiteracy, territorial aggrandizement, social upheaval and open warfare are as familiar in places on this continent as they are in parts of Europe, Africa and Asia.

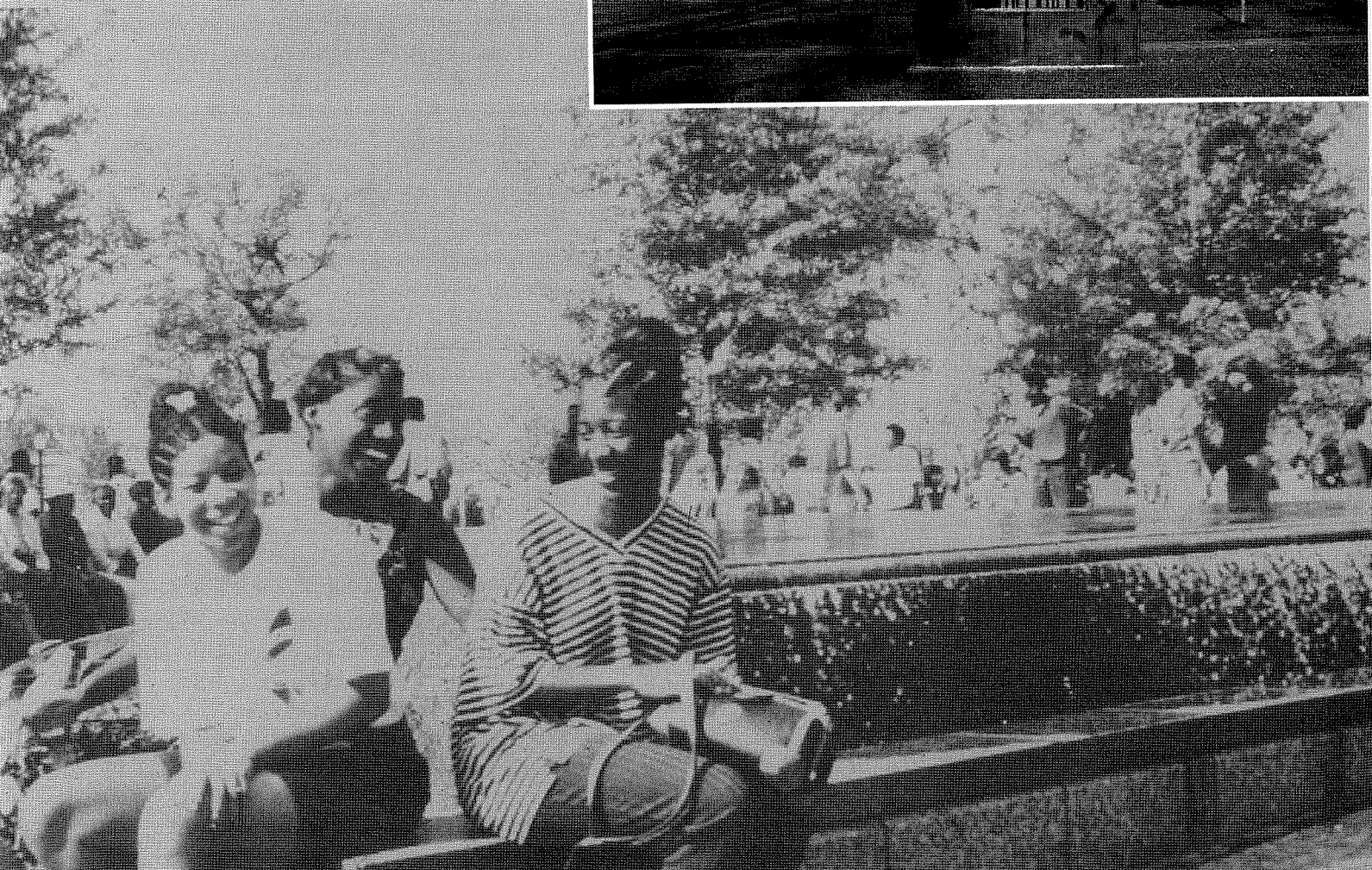
*This essay is based on a keynote address presented at the International Symposium on the Conservation of Urban Parks and Squares, sponsored by the ICOMOS International Committee of Historic Gardens and Sites, the Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation and the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects in Montreal, Quebec, May 12–15, 1993.*

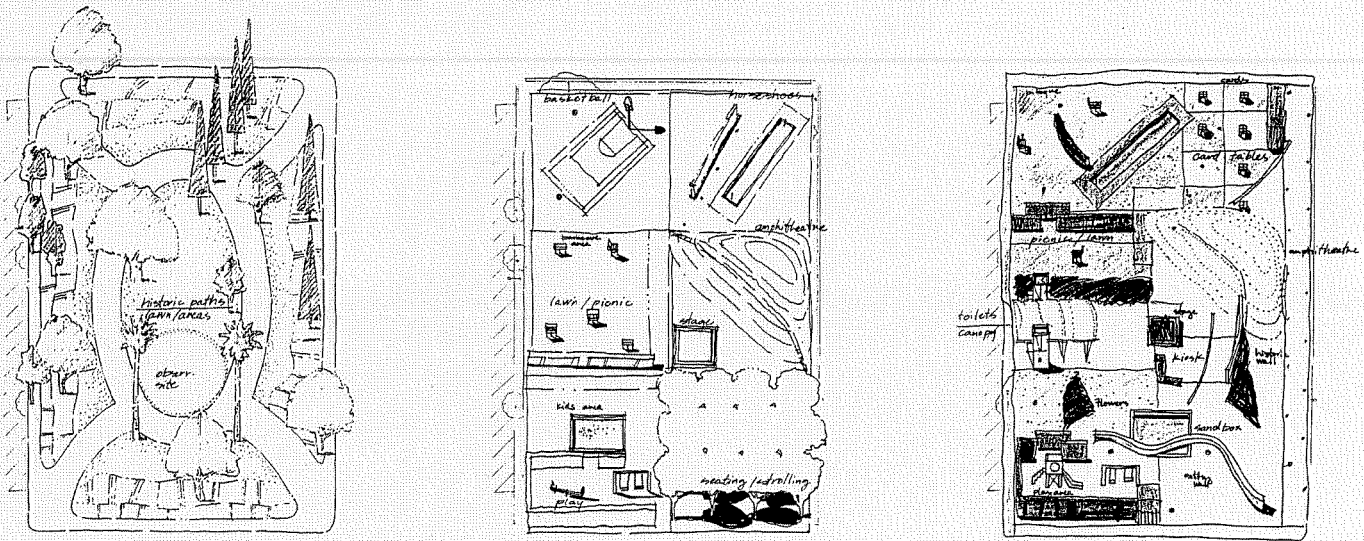


Above and background:  
Kelly Ingram Park, Birmingham,  
after recent redesign.

Right: Sculpture by James  
Drake, Kelly Ingram Park.

(Photos courtesy  
Catherine Howett)





Proposal for redesign of Lafayette Square/Old Man's Park, Oakland, Calif., by Walter Hood and Willie Pettus. Left: The park's current layout, based on an early twentieth-century design. Center: Recreation proposals, with basketball court, horseshoe pits, amphitheatre, stage and strolling area. Right: Social programming proposals, with children's play area, restrooms, garden and card tables.

The possibility of finding solutions to the environmental, economic, political and social ills that threaten the collapse of urban institutions as we know them seems somehow beyond the reach of our best planning efforts.

This sense of confusion and helplessness in the face of the complex forces eroding the quality of urban life is a relatively recent phenomenon. For most of the twentieth century, Western societies embraced an optimistic faith in the perfectability of human environments — and, ultimately, of society itself — through the wise application of rational planning methods. That faith had its roots in the Enlightenment and contributed to the philosophic foundations of the preservation movement.

Nineteenth-century models of large-scale urban planning (such as Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann's transformation of Paris and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago) nourished the imaginations of generations of architects and planners. The energy of the City Beautiful movement, with its Beaux-Arts imagery of a magisterial social order grounded in classical tradition, eventually dissipated — but not before, as Spiro Kostof noted, Beaux-Arts layouts were employed as instruments of European colonialism, providing “new quarters alongside native towns that kept the European population at a safe distance and afforded it the comforts of the mother country.”<sup>1</sup>

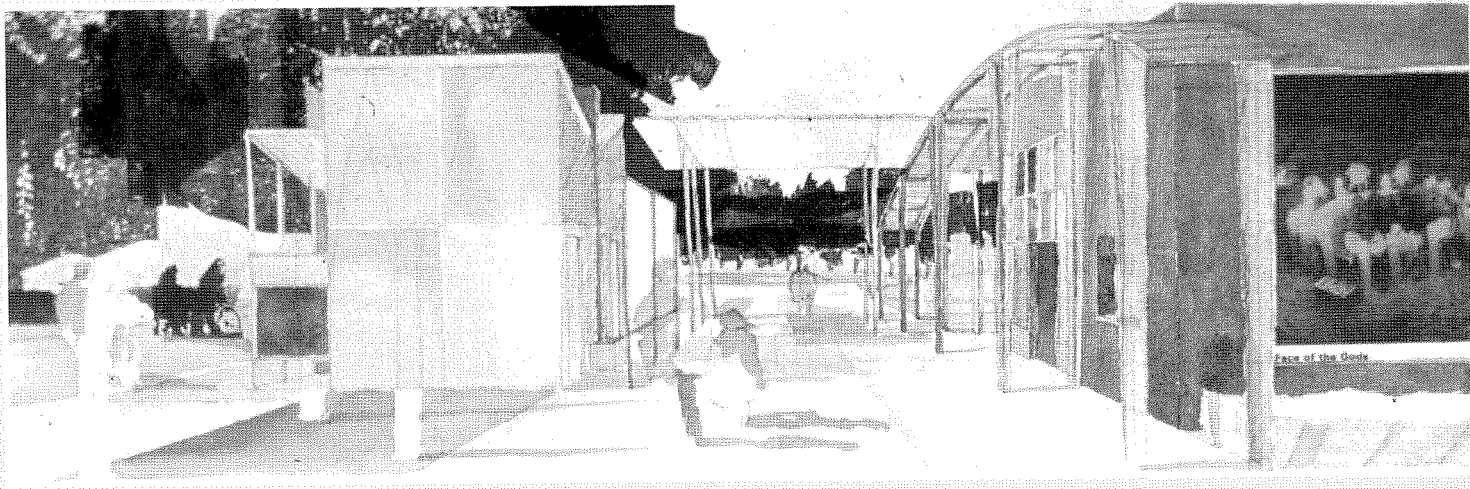
It remains true, however, that many of the most admired public spaces in cities shaped by Beaux-Arts planning have come to symbolize modes of a gracious, cosmopolitan, and secure communal life that we believe to have been common in earlier times and that we would like to recover in our own day. These places represent the city conceived as a built work of art and architecture: “a city of agreements, not differences, of freedom and undisturbed repose, of progressive rationality.”<sup>2</sup> In a real sense, such parks, streets and squares gave physical expres-

sion to an ideal of order, beauty and a stable community based upon shared values and continuous over time. Small wonder that those of us who have grown up within a culture for whom such places summon up a sense of identity, of the empowerment that comes from feeling at home in the public spaces of a well-loved city, will join efforts to restore or preserve them.

While they were in many respects no less utopian, rationalist and formalist in spirit, the ostensibly progressive and reformist social and political movements before and after World War II reacted to Beaux-Arts aestheticism and historicism by demanding a pragmatic functionalism in the design of urban spaces. A kind of anonymous landscape replaced the rhetorical splendors of the monumental city.

What is more important than this stylistic shift is recognition of how the racial, ethnic and economic ghettos dividing American cities were expanded and solidified in this period, when deliberate segregation was frequently used as an instrument of enlightened planning policy. What was grandly called the “War on Poverty” has among its monuments of defeat “the forlorn hulks of public-housing projects like Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Model Cities program that gave Oakland, California, a series of parks that Walter Hood is proposing to redesign demonstrates the limitations of even well-intentioned social engineering.

Ironically, the International-style modernism that originally inspired the stripped-down functionalist vocabulary of welfare-state planning was also appropriated, though in a much gilded and glamorized form, for commercial and institutional buildings and the parks, plazas and streets associated with them. The sheer scale of these enterprises reflects the degree to which corporate capitalism has taken over responsibility for determining the character and course of development within cities,



Proposed community buildings,  
Lafayette Square-Old Man's Park.

(Illustrations courtesy Hood Design)

a prerogative that once rested in civil authority. The plazas and malls that are touted as public-spirited contributions to communal life are almost entirely private; a discreet plaque or sign reminds visitors they are there at the sufferance of the owners. The “logic of the market” dictates land use changes, and “even people get sorted out on the basis of their economic value.”<sup>4</sup>

While the conception of the city as a force field of economic interests competing or cooperating with one another is an intellectual abstraction, it seems to bear out the felt experience of those who decry the decline in many contemporary societies of the public realm itself — and with it, those urban forms through which the civil contract to promote the common good of all citizens was expressed.

Analysis of this urban malaise has fostered the postmodern discourse among architects, urban planners and preservationists aimed at finding ways to re-integrate the public realm by restoring and re-forming public space using historic models. European theorists and practitioners led by Manfredo Tafuri, Aldo Rossi and Leon Krier castigate design that simply mines historic elements in order to evoke a nostalgic and idealized version of the past. These critical voices have demanded instead a fresh examination of historic urban morphology as a foundation for architecture and urban design.

Tafuri wants history to become the guide for planning, but insists that in using history, critical awareness must focus not on architecture alone but on the larger urban context: government regulation, political and economic concentrations of power, and the realities of the sociocultural milieu.<sup>5</sup> Rossi, like Krier, believes that archetypal urban and architectural forms possess inherent power because they derive from collective memory and are therefore familiar and comprehensible. However, Rossi recognizes that cultural memory is a double-

edged sword. He wants his own architecture and urban design to be at once an invocation and a critique of history. Urban critic M. Christine Boyer has suggested that this duality of intention in Rossi is a radical stance that “can be like walking on a thin tightrope,” since the archetypal urban forms of park, square and street “come polluted with political meanings and burdened with cultural memories.”<sup>6</sup>

The notion that in using history to tap into collective memory as a source for archetypal forms, urban planners and designers might also provide opportunities for their client communities to grapple with the distortions, limitations, inequities, even the injustices of the past, seems far removed from the arguments advanced by American adherents of neo-traditional town planning. This school of thought betrays a sunny confidence that urban problems will be solved and viable communities established when we can all get about town more easily — and when the appearance and configuration of the town itself taps into what is presumed to be our communal dream of an imagined idyllic life in an earlier, small-town America.

In its naive optimism, American neo-traditionalist town-planning seems rather like a conservative mirror-image of the rationalist and utopian movements that characterized so much of the history of twentieth-century architecture and urban planning. It presumes, for one thing, the possibility of genuine community — even within a population more diverse with respect to characteristics like race, class, ethnicity, age and income than recent projects have had to accommodate. It presumes that in spite of this potential mix of cultural backgrounds — a mix of memories, if you will — all of the citizens of these new towns will experience a sense of belonging, discovering some part of their own history in the historic fabric of their city or town. It is hard to imagine how this could happen.

If daily news reports teach us anything, it is that real history is fractious and messy. While it binds us as members of one group it may be dividing us from another. In our communal lives as in our personal lives, sad or guilty or bitter memories of the past coexist with the good. Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence all around us that different cultural groups within just about any given larger society are increasingly unwilling to have their own stories obliterated or subsumed within the mythic narratives of the dominant group.

In the center of the historic square of Santa Fe, New Mexico — a square laid out by the Spanish conquerors of the region at the beginning of the seventeenth century — a large bronze memorial honors the memory of the federal forces who put down the Indian rebellions of the nineteenth century. Every morning, Native American artisans, descendants of those conquered tribes who had fought to repossess the land of their ancestors, their own ancient home, gather under the arcades surrounding the square to sell their handicrafts.

Out of respect for that reality, the monument in the square had an official-looking postscript added — a simple statement on a small sign explaining that the language on the monument reflects the historic perspective of the time when it was made, but not that of today. Together, the two inscriptions serve history (and the community of Santa Fe and its hordes of visitors) better than a new, politically correct inscription — or removal of the monument — could ever have done.

Birmingham, Alabama, provides another illustration of how a public space can become a crucible of authentic history and meaning for the community it serves. In the 1960s, Birmingham became a symbol of southern resistance to the civil rights movement and notorious for the repressive measures its municipal authorities and supporting white supremacist groups within its population took to block racial integration. The city had its share of decent men and women pleading for the acceptance of social change, but they were powerless.

Just across from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Birmingham's Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth rallied protest marchers, was a "whites only" park — Kelly Ingram Park — a one-block-square, tree-shaded green in the heart of downtown Birmingham. In the tragic spring of 1963, Birmingham's Chief of Police "Bull" Connor repeatedly used fire hoses and police dogs to disperse marchers moving from the church into the streets. Many were arrested when they entered the park, where they clung to trees for protection from the fire hoses. That September, four children died when the church across from the park was bombed.

Kelly Ingram Park was redesigned in 1992, in connection with the construction of a Civil Rights Institute, which houses

a museum and library for which the park now serves as forecourt. The park and the Institute are the center of a Civil Rights Historic District. The city's black mayor, Richard Arrington, chose a theme for the park, "Revolution and Reconciliation," that is inscribed on low walls at its entrances. The essential character of the formal quadripartite plan of the historic park has not been significantly modified, and most of the old trees have been preserved as well, so that continuity between past and present has been preserved. That is important, because the program for the design chose to interpret the history of the park in the time of protest.

A new circular "Freedom Walk" intersecting the major paths is punctuated by memorial bronze and steel sculptures by James Drake, an artist whose work frequently addresses themes of contemporary violence. The sculptural elements include figures of the jailed children who were sent out as marchers in the false hope that they would be spared the attacks to which adults had been subjected; in another sculpture, fire hoses are trained on crouching men and women; another memorializes the event of the police dogs attacking the marchers. The theme of "reconciliation" finds expression chiefly at a large central water feature composed of four basins over which water brims and sounds.

I do not mean to suggest that we have an obligation to introduce themes of social struggle into the interpretation of every historic space or the design of new ones. What I do believe is that we must, indeed, look with a revisionist eye at the cultural messages encoded in the public spaces of our cities. We need to acknowledge the degree to which the formal and material elements in their design give expression to specific values embraced by specific segments of historic or contemporary communities. In rethinking the conservation of urban parks and squares, we need to deepen the seriousness and honesty with which we ask the initial questions "Why are we doing this?" "For whom is it being done?" "How shall it best be done?"

Neither am I calling for a new iconoclasm or a capitalist version of the Cultural Revolution. We feminists and pacifists will not demand, I hope, the removal of all the mounted generals in the parks — although it is time at least to acknowledge, if not to abjure, their message of military triumphalism.

I am not proposing the obliteration of any of the records of our complex social pasts that have been built into public spaces — such an approach merely substitutes a new utopianism for the conceptually exhausted and failed models that have brought us to the present historic moment.

Let us rather — and this may represent the most difficult accommodation to new realities for preservation philosophy — develop a tolerance for the additive, the inclusive, the complex

and, perhaps, the disordered in design and restoration, as a reflection of our respect for the experience and the memories of the “others,” whoever they may be in a particular neighborhood or city. Let us everywhere open up the conversation, welcoming confrontation instead of measuring our success on the basis of how little criticism or conflict there is. Let us make clearer by our actions that we recognize the priority that human social intercourse must have over aesthetic values and any one social group’s sense of history in the planning of our cities.

We preservationists must let our cities and neighbors know that *we* know that urban parks and squares bring into being a public good that is more precious than the individual histories of these places or our own histories, more precious than the quality of their design, more precious than trees or water or plants. That good begins just with encountering one another, with an exchange — a look, a smile, a greeting, simple human respect, the acknowledgement that we are joined to one another by the place that we are in. Encounter holds the promise of conversation, and conversation is the basis of civility.

Perhaps the nurturance of civility seems too modest a goal around which to rally at the dawn of a new millennium. It is a “little plan,” after all, but it is a little plan that has the potential to “stir the souls” of men and women of our own time.

## Notes

1. Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 673.
2. Donlyn Lyndon and Neema Kudva, “Visions of Movement: Exhibition Notes,” *Places* 7:2 (Winter 1991): 26.
3. Debra Shore, “The House that Gatreux Built,” *University of Chicago Magazine* 87 (Feb. 1995): 23.
4. Lisa R. Peattie, “Planning and Image of the City,” *Places* 7:2 (Winter 1991): 38.
5. M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 287.
6. Boyer, 289.



Sculpture by James Drake  
in Kelly Ingram Park.  
(Catherine Howett)