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The Politics of Park Design

A History of Urban Parks in America

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Preface to the 2020 Edition

The inclusion of *The Politics of Park Design* in the Humanities Open Book Program, which publishes outstanding out-of-print books (supported by the MIT Press, the National Endowment for Humanities, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), fulfills and extends my aspiration to write a sociological account of the history of parks that withstands the test of time. My preface to this new edition will be short because, in large part, the book is thorough, complete, and based on extensive and multiple sources of information. Almost forty years after the book's original publication in 1982, there are three developments I will add to the history of parks in America as we work collectively to meet the unique challenges of the twenty-first century.

First, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, a significant body of work by Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, was published in 1992, ten years after *The Politics of Park Design*. In it, the authors highlight the historical presence of Seneca Village, home to a significant population of Black Americans and Irish and German immigrants, on a site within the northwest edge of Central Park. The official records of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation and the newspapers claimed that Central Park's development and construction would replace nothing other than some "slaughter houses, milk distilleries, and bone-boiling establishments, hog pens, and

dung-heaps" (*Post*, July 20, 1851). However, we now know that these were part of an established community of over two hundred residents, which also included a school, three churches, and two cemeteries. Taking over the land of low-income, low-status ethnic groups did not even merit acknowledgment in the official records. Our understanding of competing land use and issues of social inequality therein has been significantly expanded by Rosenzweig and Blackmar's archaeological and documentary discoveries about the dislocation and erasure of Seneca Village. Continued scholarly and professional vigilance about the politics of record keeping will help to ensure that historical narratives are accurate and inclusive—an important step toward greater social equity.

Second, I observe that each of the four dominant park models articulated in my book held sway for about one generation, around thirty to thirty-five years. Since the publication of *The Politics of Park Design*, I expected that a new model might emerge by 2010. One of the required courses I took during my PhD in Sociology at the University of Chicago was demography, which alerted me to the impending ecological crisis of continued population growth and industrial development. By 1990, this early awareness was rekindled by *It's a Matter of Survival*, by Anita Gordon and David Suzuki. As awareness of climate change grew in our society, I anticipated that park ideology and design would likely take on this concern. In 1996 I received a grant from the Graham Foundation to investigate possible shifts in thinking, policy, and design of parks. With the help of graduate students in the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley, I discovered that the professional literature in landscape architecture started showing a shift in thinking and design in 1995. This shift marks the fifth model of park design—the Sustainable Park, following the four articulated in *The Politics of Park Design*. The Sustainable Park is marked by three main characteristics: (1) resource self-sufficiency; (2) integration with its larger urban system to solve problems beyond the park's borders; and (3) new models of aesthetic

expression that can be applied to other public spaces. I have published research on defining the sustainable park in *Places* and in *Landscape Journal*.¹ The article in *Landscape Journal* additionally offers a table that compares the fifth model with the prior four. In 2019, the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA) acknowledged “Defining the Sustainable Park” as one of the ten most-cited articles published in *Landscape Journal* since its creation in 1982.

Third, and finally, I would like to bring to readers’ attention the enduring and increasing importance of parks in twenty-first-century public health strategies. In the mid-nineteenth century, cholera, tuberculosis, and other diseases plagued the city’s densely crowded population and damaged the economy. Manhattan dockland quarantines meant that income from trade was lost to New Jersey, and New York City lost considerable additional seasonal income because the middle and upper classes moved out of the city for the summer, up the Hudson River Valley or to Long Island. Public health officials argued that public funds, for the first time, should be allocated to establishing Central Park because they observed that clean air helped reduce the spread of disease. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic is also causing historic loss of life and income, and once again we are experiencing the value of being outdoors to slow the spread of the virus. Recent epidemiological research conducted by Hiroshi Nishiura et al. shows that COVID-19 transmission rates are almost nineteen times lower outdoors than indoors.² People all over the world have been asked to shelter in place, but we also need exercise, fresh air, sunlight, and relationships with natural elements and spaces. Parks have become important as a safe way to meet all of these needs. Grids of six-foot circles have marked many urban parks during the pandemic, to support nationwide mandates for social distancing. City planning will continue to need to include parks and open space, and it will benefit planners to consider all five park models: Pleasure Grounds, Reform Parks, Recreation Facilities, Open Space Systems, and Sustainable Parks.

Each historical model is intended to solve a specific social problem, and thereby to benefit particular categories of persons. As societal problems evolve, the purposes of parks will be redefined and park designs will then be adjusted accordingly. I suspect that global warming, combined with struggles for distribution of the Earth's finite resources, will intensify the forces at play in the Sustainable Park. Additionally, public health concerns and management of global pandemics will likely influence the shape and use of urban parks. I expect these factors will catalyze a distinctively new, sixth model, around 2025–2030. What might the next model look like? What design qualities will it prioritize? What functions will it serve? What kinds of activities will it support? Who might be the ideal beneficiaries of the sixth park model? Readers of this book may be among those who make these important choices and contribute to the future of urban parks in America.

Notes

1. Galen Cranz and Michael Boland, "The Ecological Park as an Emerging Type," *Places* 15, no. 3 (2003): 44–47, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/68v5m7k2>; Galen Cranz and Michael Boland, "Defining the Sustainable Park," *Landscape Journal* 23, no. 2 (2004): 102–120, <https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.23.2.102>.
2. Hiroshi Nishiura, Hitoshi Oshitani, Tetsuro Kobayashi, Tomoya Saito, Tomimasa Sunagawa, Tamano Matsui, and Takaji Wakita, "Closed Environments Facilitate Secondary Transmission of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," *medRxiv*, April 16, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.02.28.20029272>.