

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

The Politics of Park Design

A History of Urban Parks in America

© 1982 MIT

License Terms:

Made available under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public
License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon
Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/5469.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5469.001.0001)

Preface

In the summer of 1969 I designed playgrounds for Chicago's Neighborhood Improvement and Beautification (NIB) Program, which was part of the federally funded open-space program. My job was to convert vacant lots into temporary playgrounds—they would stand as long as their owners did not want the land for other purposes. I soon learned that I needed to understand the ultimate purpose of parks in order to design these playgrounds. Looking for guides for action, I began to pay attention to what people and professionals felt were the purposes of parks and open space.

Among the variety of views no single one dominated. Inconclusive debate about the oldest and largest parks, the great nineteenth-century pleasure grounds, epitomized the confusing situation. These older urban parks were under attack. They had already developed a reputation as barren no-man's-lands, unsafe for use day or night, and now hippies, radicals, and war resisters were using them as rallying grounds. The association of parks with deviants, already established by beggars, winos, and bums, was intensified. Because these parks lay unused and dangerous, some people suggested that they be sold for other, more pressing uses, such as housing and schools, which would simultaneously generate revenues for ailing municipal budgets. To those worried about losing open spaces for future generations, others suggested keeping the land in the public domain and

leasing it to developers. The objection was that, once buildings were constructed, tearing them down would be hard to justify. Still another possibility was trading sections of the large parks for lots within densely built areas of the city, so that a checkerboard of open and built space would replace the large concentration of park land. Critics responded that only large amounts of land could create the psychological sense of being in nature. But people could now drive to regional or national forests, which suggested that cities had no need for this simulation within their borders. The rejoinder was that children from poor families without cars could not afford to get to the countryside, so the need for an experience of nature within the city was as real now as when the parks were created. In general the costs of trading large parks for small ones were not well enough understood for anyone to champion the idea seriously as a risk worth taking.

Irresolution about how to treat parks from the past was symptomatic of contemporary uncertainty about the meaning of parks. When I looked to present-day examples of park construction and supervision, I found confusion and failure more often than revelation. The precedent set by the urban designers during the previous two years of Chicago's NIB program was no help; they had done little more than drop a Bunker Hill climber, a swing, and a slide—all ready-made, standard playground equipment from a catalog—onto the site. These playgrounds had been wrecked within a matter of days after the work crews left the sites, leading me to speculate that people felt insulted by these superficial tokens of recreational service.

The NIB designers had few other models available to them, either from architecture schools, which tend to overlook outdoor recreation design, or from practicing professionals, who had established this scattershot approach in the first place. Contemporary park and recreation designers would typically include berms and curved paths to suggest a naturalistic landscape, gymnastic equipment to accommodate vigorous physical activity, tennis courts to meet demand,

and free-form modular timber sets to stimulate a child's imagination. Each of these elements has come from a different park type, evolved at a different stage in urban park history, but, rather than differentiate these elements and group them into coherent patterns, designers proceed as if they hope that a smattering of each type will increase their probability of success.

When I turned to professional writing about park design and to legal and bureaucratic practice, definition was also lacking. I discovered that the purpose of municipal parks became problematic not long after parks became institutionalized as a governmental service. In contrast some planners looked wistfully to preindustrial towns where the green spaces had well-defined purposes, were a distinctive component of the original townscape, and hence resonated aesthetically with their urban surroundings. In contemporary practice the word "park" applied to an almost indiscriminate range of properties, from children's playgrounds, neighborhood playfields, golf, bathing, and camping areas, athletic fields to zoological and botanical gardens, arboreta, landscaped ovals, triangles, and other small segments of street grid, neighborhood parks, downtown squares, scenic outlets, waterfront, and land reservations. The common purpose uniting this collection was not obvious.

A sociologist might be expected to turn to popular opinion to find a set of guidelines for park design, or to observe actual park usage to induce design principles. Such an empirical user-needs approach is one tactic for shaping design but obviated in this case by the very confusion and apathy that alerted me to the problem in the first place. Moreover this kind of empiricism simply adds up what individuals want or do, without reference to what parks can or should do for groups, neighborhoods, cities, and society as a whole.

Turning from behavior to contemporary cultural symbolism as a way to induce purpose fares no better, for today parks mean greenery, grass, and trees, and the park is an innocuous symbol that everybody favors except bad people. Thus in Kurosawa's movie about the heroism of a dying

Japanese bureaucrat, only gangsters want a bar rather than a playground on an open site. While American parks are now associated with danger—American film-makers for the last ten years have used parks as symbols not just of tranquility and innocence but also of fear and foreboding—people do not think that the parks themselves are fearsome. Rather they blame external intrusion, and never for a moment do they think that the institution of the park itself might invite conflict because of the ambiguity of the norms for its proper use. Academic attempts to identify any widely agreed-upon idea about the purpose of city parks have fared no better than professional, activist, or lay efforts.

In response to this widespread confusion, and because of my own confusion about what should be done with my vacant lots, I decided to investigate the history of urban parks in the United States. At some point, I thought, taxpayers must have had clear-cut notions about what parks could accomplish; at least when parks were first created, they must have agreed about the wisdom of creating them and articulated some explicit goals for them. I sensed that the choices made in those early years would have an appreciable effect on how people defined and planned parks today, and I hoped to be able to anticipate the trajectory set by prior social conditions. Thus I began a long journey into the past, where I discovered not just one set of ideas about the role of city parks but four distinct constellations. Without a historical, comparative method I would not have been able to discover this evolution. This book is the story of what I learned and an attempt to fill part of the unexplained gap regarding the role of city parks within American social structure and the intellectual and moral life of the culture.

Despite my commitment to a historical method, this study differs from ordinary narrative history in several ways. More like a sociologist than a historian, I sought general trends, often at the expense of the full particulars leading to and stemming from specific events. That is to say, particular points in time were not as important as understanding

the forces that shaped the movement. The concern for the movement as a whole required a distinctively interdisciplinary study that weaves together concepts and methods from architecture, landscape architecture, social history, and sociology. This in turn meant that shifting the lens of analysis has been more important than presenting a straightforward chronology. The structure of the book reflects that process of successive inquiry in which ideal types are created, located within social structure, and their cultural function assessed. The device of constructing ideal types from the historical record is associated with Weberian sociology, but its broad outlines recur in many areas. Even Hellenistic Greek sculpture is a composite of the ideal features of human form, rather than a realistic, literal representation of any particular person. This study is more concerned with the construction of models and the internal logic of the type itself than an ordinary narrative history would be.

This study differs not only from historical narratives in general but also from the existing scholarship on parks. It is the first history of the first 130 years of the American park movement in one account, not restricted to one city, one region, or one period. Other studies have looked at one dimension—usually the aesthetic or recreation as a social service—or restrict a fuller analysis to only one city or region or to only one period in time.

In keeping with social research methods, I treated three urban park systems—those of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco—as case studies. Together with occasional comparisons with other American towns and an overview of the urban park movement across the nation, they lead to generalization about the nature of the American park movement as a whole. This is possible because the development of American urban parks has been remarkably homogeneous.

New York is an important case because Central Park was the first public park developed in the context of what be-

came the urban park movement, and the city continued to pioneer in many aspects of park planning. Chicago is significant because the reform park was developed to its fullest there: among park administrations Chicago became famous for the first and highest development of the field house, a distinctive physical prototype with a new philosophy of social programming. San Francisco completes the triad with a western case, and one in which similarities to the others is not simply the result of Frederick Law Olmsted's personal tastes and ideals, as it might be argued with the early parks in the many other cities where he worked.

Parks themselves are still important today in different ways, emphatically not just part of the parenthetical history of gardens or landscape design. From the point of view of understanding society they are an excellent example of how social forces shape and are shaped by the physical world. Social, economic, political, and psychological processes influenced park location, size, shape, composition, and equipment and landscaping. Once these features were fixed, they both limited and stimulated the options available for human interaction.

City parks are also important for the role they played and continue to play in urbanization. They are part of the rise of modern institutions—the successive attempts to gain control over the social and physical consequences of urbanization in the context of industrial capitalism. Their past and potential use in the processes of creating social, psychological, and political order, of planning and controlling land use, and of shaping civic form and beauty make them important today. The earliest park spokesmen, like Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted, believed that park environments could exert a civilizing influence on working-class men, and today policy-makers still acknowledge the physical configuration of the park as an active culture-bearing medium in people's lives, both materially and intellectually.

A host of people have helped me write this book. Financial aid has come from Princeton University's Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Institute of Planning and Urban Development and its director Mel Webber at the University of California at Berkeley, the Regents Humanities Fellowship of the University of California, and the Department of Architecture and its chair Joseph Esherick. With this support, I was able to hire fine research assistants: Tom Seebohm, Mark Knoerr, and Marcie Adelson. Nancy Layton, Marjorie Dobkin, and Tonia Chao were especially helpful assistants. Carolyn Francis and David Fagundes helped verify the manuscript. Two typists bore the largest share of manuscript preparation: Dorothy Heydt and Marcie McGaugh. Working with my editor, John Taylor, both strengthened and lightened the manuscript before it went to the MIT Press, where skillful editors improved the manuscript yet again. Thanks also to Gerald Suttles, Richard Wade, Albert Fein, David Matza, Charles McLaughlin, Norma Evenson, John Pock and Mark Mack—who read or commented on selected chapters. The librarians at the Chicago Historical Society, the University of Chicago, the New York Public Library, the Museum of the City of New York, the University of Washington Library, Seattle Historical Society, University of California, and the San Francisco Public Library have helped me find the documents, newspapers, and photographs important to this study.

