

# Parks, People and City





Parks mean freedom and community, repose and recreation. Parks need to be multifunctional, ecological and cultural, open to their users and even open to the city. Park design needs to become social art and collective creativity.

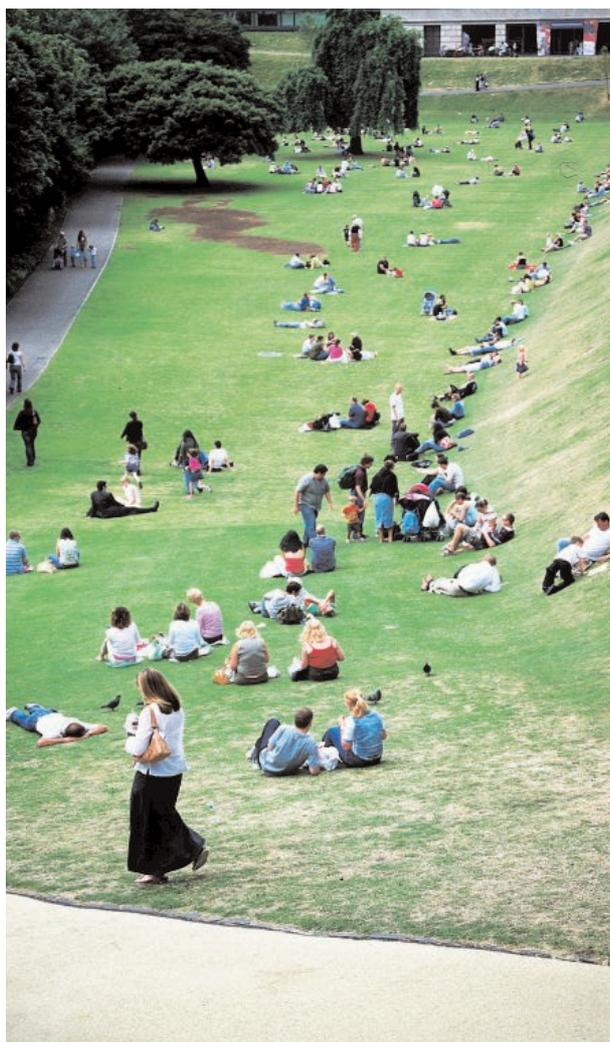
**T**he park is a 19th century Western response to unhealthy and dis-integrated urban environments caused by industrialization and rapid urbanization in the 18th century. Its model originally has been the “rich men’s private garden” or “hunting park”, be it picturesque, pastoral, or classical; a social gift for the many “proletarians” and “new bourgeois” to share.

As the Impressionist paintings show, the park was intended for strolling, for seeing and being seen, and picnicking; it was stage as well as scenery. This kind of park was not only about framing our experience and consciousness, but also was literally “framed and confined” within park areas. Just as landscape scenery is a framed view by the window, with a physical wall separating viewers and the viewed, there existed also a psychological wall between the scenery and the viewer, leading to distanced and distancing aesthetic experience and contemplation.

Does such a park have meaning in today’s urban context? Originally intended for the public in industrial and politically repressed societies of the past, do these parks have meaning in today’s egalitarian participatory democracies? Do they have meaning in a privatized, culture with a short history of civic community, such as in many Asian countries? On the other hand, why have so many parks been vandalized, under-kept, and become unsightly and unsafe? And why are so many decent landscapes today gated, fenced, privatized and even commercialized?

Of course we need parks, whenever and wherever we have opportunities and potentials. We need them not only for massive greening and repair of our urban environments in many parts of the world, but also because our public spaces and hearts of our cities become increasingly privatized, commercialized, and gated. Parks mean freedom and com-

A park works if it is accepted and perceived as part of the city. Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh offer a perfect place for a break, and the best views of the castle.



munity, as well as repose and recreation. Yet, many of today's parks, particularly those of modernist designs do not appear healthy and happy or connected to real place and local people. Is it because the park has become a distemic (distanced, cosmopolitan, and public) space rather than, to use Edward T. Hall's theory and Barrie Greenbie's terms, a proxemic (close, locally identified and defended, and cared-for) place? Are parks conceptual and photogenic to the mediated viewers and reviewers with the conditioned eyes of disinterested observers, but without sensual and meaningful connection to the local community?

**W**e need drastically different kinds of parks, and for that a radically different approach toward making the urban park. And, in our view, some of the more successful parks today go beyond the status quo. Following are some thoughts on characteristics of more successful 21st century urban parks, thoughts that have guided us in our own endeavor of park making.

First, a park today is not just a stroll park for "ladies or gentlemen", or just for play of the youth and pleasant family picnic. It is definitely not just for creating landscape scenery like in an oil painting. It needs to be multi-functional, ecologically performing and culturally enhancing and does not have to be one unified and coherent master image. It can be a collage. The park itself, however, has to be living, healing the land, teaching us how to live, showing us the wonder of nature's ability to create and sustain, and human ability to reciprocate with nature. Productive ecologically, it can also function as urban farm for food and/or flowers, and as workshop for artists, and thus belong to and even support the community, as well as be open to the public at large.

Second, as much as possible a park should not be bounded or bordered in a zone defined by city planners or a social sector. It must be open: visually, socially and ecologically. It also needs to be programmatically open to change, open to participation of community, open to aesthetic participation of users by using comprehensible formal languages, and open to momentary or time-share ownership of the users. Desirably, an urban park today could reach out into the city like an octopus. Likewise, it could let the city come in with its urban uses and activities, with restaurants, theaters, museums, or even complementary housing. The result would be a "park in the city" or a "city in the park", realizing necessary interpenetration and mutual complementarity between nature and culture, and park and city.

A successful park offers an occasion to make the city healthier and urban life creative, communal, and free. It becomes literally base camp, or showcase, of the green/ecological guerrillas, infiltrating and regenerating areas around it: street, plaza, waterfront, parking lot, abandoned lot and declining zone; making walls and roofs green, and opening the "ground",

Building a park offers the chance to make the city better, to provide green infrastructure or ecological stepping stones, as in the derelict Schöneberg railway sidings in Berlin which were developed into the Südgelände Nature Park.



the base and platform of the city, to breathe, day-lighting the underground, including covered streams. Parks are vital agents to regenerate the city itself, to regain lost land, and to re-soften the hardened and uncivil city (or our “calcified mentality”) made through the instrumental view of, and controlling paranoia against, nature. Parks can turn our high cholesterol city into a more vegetarian and healthy one: energized and energizing, creative, meaningful, beautiful, and engaging. Such parks will help us, and our city, to throw away all the abusive and deceitful use of the name, park – car park, industrial park, office park, amusement park, or voyeuristic zoos of confined animals and botanical gardens without ecological attention, which are 19th century ideas practiced through much of the 20th century. They give the wrong lessons about nature, and incorrect interpretation of human’s essentially reciprocal relationship with nature.

Third, excessive attention to “maintenance free” and “crime free” conditions often leads to downward averaging in design quality and to monotony of planting. Some parts of a park could be richer in experience, meaning, function, while other areas may be less intensely designed and cared for. Cost should not be dominant over value of a park. Parks designed by educated minds will have educating effects. Differentiated in this regard, we may find “gardens” in the park, in spite of the fact that a park is not just a big and cheap garden. Why should “Volkspark” and “volksgarten” be separated?

Energized through ecological, community-based design, a park can be self-sustaining as well as evolving, loving, and loved by the community, engaging its visitors not just to view, but also to participate in the actualization and caring of it. Sustainability should not be just a design tool for today’s park but one of the important goals of the park. The reality of a park is not in the park itself, not in its form or its space, but in our embodied experience of it and its ecological system processes. Why do we use “parking” for cars, rather than for people and city? Park design, in our view, must strive for an emotional adoption by the local users. We have long wondered why the term “parking” does not have the same nuance as “gardening”. Can we not think of “parking” as producing clean water and diverse wildlife habitat in the city, or partly as community gardening or urban farming? This way urban dwellers, park-adopters, can experience living things grow, and enjoy harvesting and then preparing for the next season. What a therapeutic, creative and spiritual experience it can be, leading to the realization of living landscape, the quality of “villa urbana” and “villa rustica”, city and country, and country in the city.

Fourth, a park is definitely not just a large garden. We know that when modernist architects in the post-war period designed the city as if it is large architecture this approach led to severe human, social, and ecological cost and failure. Use of the pastoral landscape garden or Baroque classical gar-

den as park metaphor or image is to be avoided. Both of them are rooted in visions of controlling nature by distanced contemplation. Reflective of the hegemony of vision and aesthetics of elitist and taste culture, their aesthetic languages were closed to the non-literati. Yet we can use “park” as idealized metaphor for the city, just as Ebenezer Howard used “garden” as metaphor for the utopian city. The park could become more than just an escape and relief from, or amelioration of, the ugly and the stressful city. Rather, it can function as healer and inspirer for a good way to live and for a just and healthy city; a place where citizens learn or are reminded of how to build a livable and civilized city. There even would be little need for parks as long as our cities and landscapes are healthy and functioning. So should we not strive to make the city like a park, rather than build and design parks as excuses for building unhealthy cities?

Fifth, 21st century parks could be designed to teach citizens about the indispensable reciprocity between humans and nature, and culture and nature in the process of their symbiosis and co-evolution. To design the park to please us, while we have no interest in pleasing nature, does not appear to be wise. Instead, by releasing the natural energy of the site, by letting it breathe, live, grow, change and become, we would find new sense in the “pleasure of giving”. Parks designed to be free, creative, and living would make us happy, or inspired and wondering. The Western mythology of killing the dragon (our inner nature) finds its contrary reflection in the East Asian mythology of pleasing the dragon through the dragon dance. To fear and kill nature is to kill nature in us as well. This fear is what we must be fearful of.

Sixth, a park exists not just for conservation and protection, but also for creation and development and for repair and regeneration. It could be positioned and configured to lead urban growth, and to work as stimulating acupuncture point (instead of surgical transformation or “aesthetic surgery”) strategically healing, vitalizing and adding value to the city. This would trigger a designed development to catalyze sustainable urban growth. Making a park is always an occasion to make the city better, to provide green infrastructure or ecological stepping stones, and to give enduring structure and backbone for the future city, not just as green or blue corridors but also using the land as great ecological, living machine. The cost of building such a park cannot be evaluated fairly by only looking at the improved site. One has to account for the impact on the city and the environment, a taxable windfall benefit.

Our approach to designing such parks had better be open-ended, just as the designed product should be open and indeterminate: designing process and framework of design, not the product and form; designing strategically, not comprehensively; under-designing, not over-designing. Modernism’s fixation with goals, end result, and final image (often as art

**Parks such as Berlin’s Südgelände or the IGA-Park in Rosstock, make the dynamic natural processes in the city visible, but nature is presented and at the same time protected from the observer. This turns parks into show gardens.**



Parks such as Westerpark in Amsterdam are accessible and interactive; they require little construction and operational cost. This kind of park repairs and regenerates the land, necessitates little maintenance and provides a simple but supportive recreational place.



object), and compulsion to design everything as “master architect”, and preoccupation with ego, does not lead to a good park. We have learned that it simply doesn’t work anymore. To enable the users to join the creative as well as care-taking effort we should capture untapped sources of implicit local knowledge and of creativity of the stakeholders. We need to empower the “others”, and let the community itself realize their full potentials and their dreams, through participatory design, construction, and stewardship. If this approach leads to imperfection, we landscape architects should learn to accept it as a new paradigm, and comfort ourselves with knowing that the park is loved and has become theirs. The role of landscape architects then changes from performers to enablers and to composers allowing and even expecting spontaneous improvisation. This may not lead to modernist slick, photogenic design of instant gratification or dramatic effect (design consumed through “trade” magazines), maybe neither to design awards. Slick design however is rarely humanly responsive, and ecologically functioning. Rarely is it poetic or alive in reality. In the end, park design is not just about form, function, structure or even space. It is about embodied “experience of people”, and living, and self-organizing “process of nature”, empowering community, and enabling the users, all of which would contribute to give identity and vitality to place.

We both are weary of designers who talk about “concept”, intention or goal, but are ignorant of people and ecology, and careless about the outcome. We are suspicious about images of parks without people and context. We wish that more landscape architects today would stop talking about “my ideas” and see to it that those ideas are received, fertilized and incubated by the community through time, leading to the delivery, maturation and adoption of the park as their child. Park design needs to become social art and collective creativity, an occasion to build community. So, we better pursue a park with “design of evolution and emergence” and “aesthetics of participation and immersion”. We need to learn to refuse evaluation and selection of design through visual media alone, and be thoughtful that our designers’ language does not liken medical doctors’ prescriptions in Latin.

A city without park is not a city, just as a house without a garden is not a proper home to dwell in. Creation is not possible without conservation, the reservation of surplus energy. For a city truly to be and become the ultimate creation of human civilization, it has to show humans as self-aware, self-reflective, and self-exploratory nature. Because humans can, as Louis Kahn said, create what nature cannot; because, with creative human intervention, nature can become more beautiful and meaningful. In the end to talk about parks is to talk about the city as much as about what landscape architecture is, and what landscape architects can do.