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Creating Great Urban Parks



We believe that urban parks can and should evolve from their current, primarily recreational role, to serve as important catalysts for community development and enhancement. Parks have the potential to be an essential component in transforming and enriching our cities. A park and its surrounding area can be thought of not only as a place to understand and relate to nature, but also as a place for social and cultural exchange. A park can be a place that is alive and teeming with entrepreneurial activities such as markets; recreational activities such as children playing or people skating; casual activities such as walking and jogging; or as a setting for art and community events.

For many years, and in many cities throughout the world, parks have played a pivotal role in shaping communities. The first formal “parks,” such as Central Park in New York City, were created in the nineteenth century to be passive and beautiful, in contrast to the dense, dirty reality of urban life. The Sailboat Pond in Central Park is a good example of a successful place create in this tradition. It

was designed to be both a park destination and a place to enjoy nature.

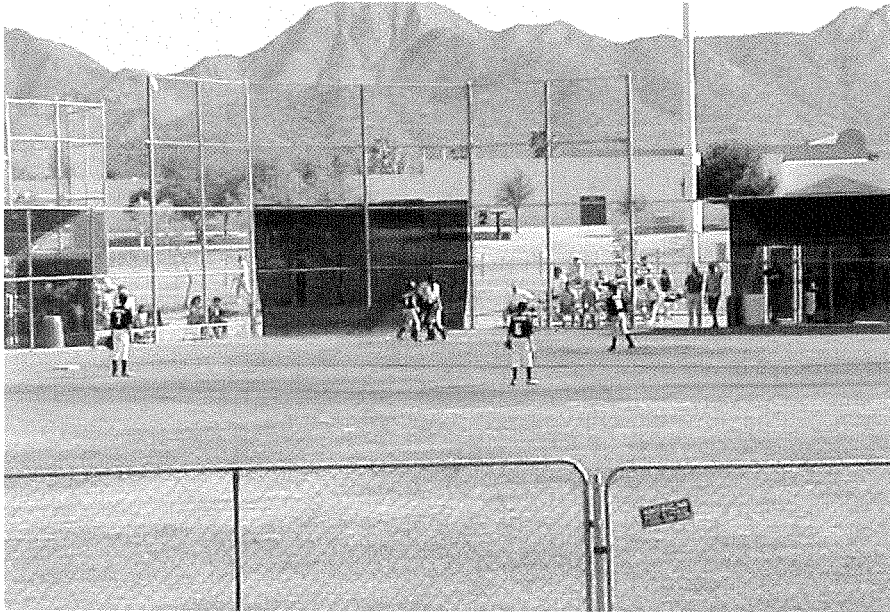
More recently, parks have come to be thought of as only one part of a larger system of open spaces that also includes town squares, plazas, greenways, and a variety of other types of spaces. In fact, the term “open space system” is often used to describe everything in a city that is not a building or a road. Such a view suggests a wide range of benefits that parks can provide. Yet most cities have not yet realized the benefits of quality public spaces and public life. And many have not even begun to explore the role that parks can play in revitalizing communities.

Many of today’s urban parks provide space for few activities other than traditional forms of recreation. Neither do they make much effort to attract people such as seniors or children, or people who are just looking for a good place to sit or walk on a daily basis. Sometimes, they don’t even include sidewalks or places of

Above: Laguna Beach, California.

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shade — or places where one might buy a sandwich or cup of coffee. The danger here is that when there are too few reasons for people to go to parks, fewer people use them, and they cease to be valued.

We have found that two important factors are involved in creating parks that are important community places. The first is determining whether a park is a successful “place.” A good place provides a range of things to do — a multitude of activities for different age groups and types of people (activity and use). It is also easy to get to and connected to the surrounding community (accessibility). It is safe, clean and attractive, and there should be places to sit (comfort and image). Most importantly, it is a place to meet people, an integral part of community life (sociability).

The second important factor involves process. The first step here is to understand community concerns, but one should also observe how a park is used and measure people’s perceptions of it. Lastly, one should determine how the assets of the community can be used to develop a plan

and program for the park. If all these steps are completed successfully, a positive community vision for the new park will emerge.

Of course, the final and essential step is to do something: to make changes, to experiment and evaluate how changes have affected use.

What follows are a few examples of parks that have become catalysts in the transformation of urban areas.

Union Square Park, New York City

At one time Union Square Park was a hub for hotels, theaters and fashion, and a center of political debate among labor unionists, communists, anarchists, and socialists. Yet by the early 1970s the area surrounding the park had become run-down, and the park itself had come to be perceived as dangerous. However, in recent years the park has been renovated based on its historic design.

As part of this effort, a business improvement district was developed in the area around the park. A farmer’s market and seasonal Christmas market were also established in the parking lots at its north and west ends.

The park, the market, and the surrounding areas have since flourished. The market in particular now attracts many people, provides entrepreneurial opportunities, and gives the community a valuable connection to the farms and land surrounding the city.

Laguna Beach, California

A linear park and walkway are now located between the Pacific Coast Highway and the Pacific Ocean in downtown Laguna Beach, California. These spaces provide a range of facilities: courts for small-sided sports such as basketball, climbing structures for children, seating and game areas, a boardwalk for strolling, a cafe, and extensive flower beds and landscape displays. The park is considered a major asset to the community.

San Bernadino, California

Until recently, the heart of San Bernadino consisted of a large parking lot in front of City Hall, surrounded by streets with fast-moving traffic. In an attempt to bring people back downtown, a central square has now been built that includes a lawn surrounded by a trellis, a walkway and seating areas, and a bus stop. Through the addition of angled parking on the streets around the park, traffic has also been slowed, and the park has become more accessible to its surrounding areas.

Unique to the creation of this park was the idea that the planning and programming of the new park would come directly from the community. To accomplish this, the city and the downtown business association asked all nonprofit associations interested in using the park to contact them. They received many letters and calls in return, and today a tent is located at one end of the square, in which weddings, holiday performances, and fashion shows are held. In addition,



communities, and that work for their communities — as economic incubators, as environmental centers, as places of social interaction. Parks can be important institutions where residents can share heritage and learn about each other. And they can simply be places for people to go for a stroll, to take a break from their hectic daily lives.

—Fred Kent and Kathy Madden



there are several different types of markets around the park's perimeter. Today this space is functioning as a successful central square for the people of San Bernadino.

Today, some cities are beginning to see that parks can contribute significantly to the quality of life for their residents. By integrating parks into the cultural lives of neighborhoods,

and by giving responsibility for maintenance, new programs, and (in some cases) design to communities themselves, there has been a renewal of interest in parks in places where they were previously thought to be impossible.

To create great parks and great cities we have to take the next step: to create parks that belong to their com-

Opposite : Ballfield near Scottsdale, Arizona.

Top: Union Square Green Market, New York City.

Bottom: Flower vendors in Union Square, New York City.

Photos courtesy Project for Public Spaces.