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To Rally Discussion: Rethinking Urban Parks

The summer 2003 issue of *Places* (15.3) revealed the vitality remaining in the enduring aspect of urban parks, “as green and unencumbered, nature pictorialized and furnished, places of both refuge and assembly.” This is the separate and apart, public-estate notion of park. But in the last quarter century, the idea of park has been moving beyond its manmade boundary to take on a unifying and encompassing, place-saving role in the urban environment.

The origins of park as an urban definer and organizing element go back to Olmsted, who envisioned park systems, including parkways, as an organizing element for cities, steering the flow of development. Historian David Schuyler, author of *The New Urban Landscape*, found that the Prospect Park assignment led Olmsted, “to a full realization that no single park, no matter how large and how well designed, would provide the citizens with the beneficial influences of nature.” Later, Louis Mumford would also declare, “Park planning cannot possibly stop at the edges of the parks. The park system is thus the spearhead of comprehensive urban planning.”

Yet this dynamic dimension of parks was dormant for many decades in the twentieth century. Indeed, urban park historian Galen Cranz has pointed out that park administrators drew back, and were marginalized by urban planners, who viewed urban parks as “one, but only one, of the physical elements that a planner could use to help give identifiable shape to a community.”

That began to change in 1960s as part of what Cranz calls the open-space, or fourth, era of urban parks. She declared, “There was a fluidity at their perimeters, so that park flowed into city and city into park. This went with the characterization of the park as an epitome, or ideal reflection, of the city and with the use of parks for experiences of the pattern and flow of urban life — for the contemplation of the city itself as a work of art.”

In the nineteenth-century industrial city of Lowell, Massachusetts, notions of parks and historic preservation were joined in what the local organizers called an “urban cultural park,” or, in effect, the city as the park. The name captured several civic aspirations: “urban” referred to a settled area; “cultural” to man’s attainments, which in the case of Lowell was the story of America’s first industrial planned community; and “park” meant a sense of coherence and traditional park elements, like public use for recreation and park-like activities like canal boat rides. In Lowell, the park plan was the urban plan, used to turn a gritty city where everything was perceived as dull, into an interesting place.

After Lowell received national recognition (which came, in part, at the cost of having to adopt the name “National

Historical Park” preferred by Congress), the urban cultural park idea took hold in New York State, first with six neighboring cities, towns and villages at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers (today known as Riverspark), and then with what is now a seventeen-unit State Heritage Area System. But again the name “urban cultural park” did not last. In both New York and nationally, the expanded notion of park as definer and organizer lost out to a more benign rubric, “heritage area.”

In a developed world where urban places look increasingly alike and where we face the sameness of cities and suburbs, the enlarged notion of park that highlights overall cultural and natural themes, fosters linkages, and manages through an integration of conservation, education, recreation and sustainable development offers our best bet to establish overall qualities of place. I have to wonder why it seems so difficult to cast our attention not only on the singular-space or refuge park, and not on how a park can be the definer and organizing force for a whole urban setting — or for a region, as has been the case with New York’s six-million-acre Adirondack Park.

On the regional level of nature parks, Italian urban and national park planner Roberto Gambino has even advanced the provocative notion that nature parks are obsolete.

[Nature parks] can’t be any longer considered as nature sanctuaries, different and separate from their territorial context, since they are nodes of broader ecological networks needing to involve the whole territory. They can’t any longer be considered as special areas conceived essentially for public enjoyment, since they are always (at least in the Italian and European experience) inhabited territories and cultural landscapes, where the public enjoyment must be admitted or permitted only when and if it can improve and doesn’t trouble ecological, cultural and economic local balance.

Gambino is saying that European nature parks should no longer be treated as island fortresses, but rather as part of larger regional environmental, social and economic systems or networks.

I suggest something along the same line be considered in the case of urban parks — that we reserve the use of the word “park” as the term urban cultural park has been used — that is, to define coherent settled areas including whole cities and groupings of neighboring cities sharing overarching natural and cultural histories. Let us come up with a new name for the civic spaces, or public realm, we now call urban parks.

The intent is not to diminish traditional park landmarks like Central Park or the creativity of designers like Walter Hood who are bringing out the meaning and natural quality of hybrid landscapes. Olmsted and Hood parks, for

example, have pulled their weight as place markers and makers for their larger urban environments. But, environmentally and culturally, it is time for an inclusive and holistic level of park thinking, design, and management that takes into account the whole cultural narrative and built environment of urban settings or landscapes.

Look around the world and one sees forces at work in this direction. The Council of Europe has designated the whole of Europe as a cultural landscape. It seeks “to achieve sustainable development based on a balanced and harmonious relationship between individuals, society and economic activity and the environment.” Ordinary or everyday landscapes, no less than outstanding ones, are covered, “since they all decisively influence the quality of the surroundings in which the Europe’s population live.”

UNESCO has also taken an all-encompassing approach in the Istanbul Declaration of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Sept. 18, 2002). It recognizes the dynamic link between tangible and intangible heritage, and their deep interdependence.

Notwithstanding the failure of the U.S. to participate in international efforts to curb global warming, the Kyoto climate-change agreement and other international environmental protocols are increasingly drawing our lives and communities into a regime of stewardship more traditionally associated with parks. Stewardship is now a global necessity for us all, wherever we may live.

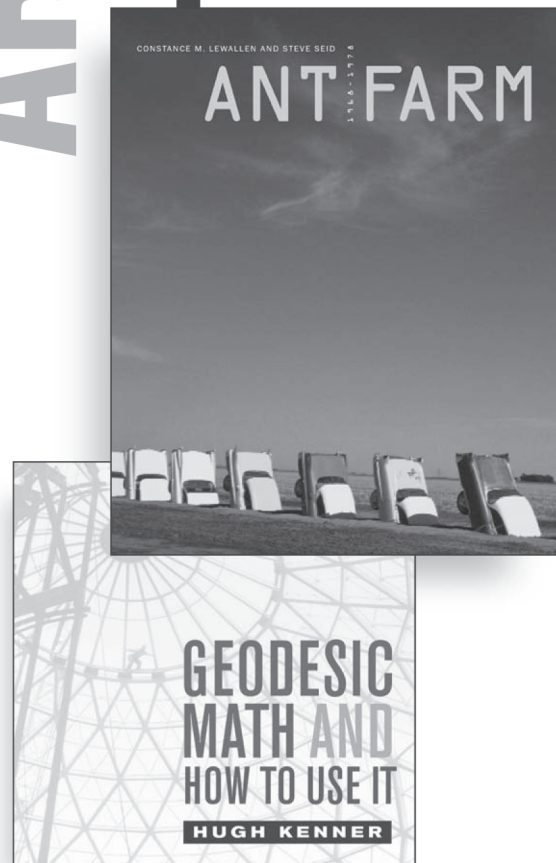
For more than a quarter century I have argued for the expansion of the notion of parks to include the city and region as a park. Needless to say, it has been a challenge. The aforementioned Adirondack Park, with both 130,000 residents and almost three million acres of constitutionally protected wild forest land, is more than one hundred years old, and yet it is still in the painful process of becoming a park. Likewise, urban cultural parks, a.k.a. heritage areas, continue with generally little public awareness beyond their individual elements or sites.

These examples of the expanded notion of park, or what Thoreau might call “castles in the air,” have failed to realize their potential, largely because we have failed to take the time, or summon the will, to rethink traditional and accepted notions of urban parks, and so put a foundation under them.

The *Places* issue on Parks was all about parks as refuge. It offered fine examples of creativity and imagination and realization of social values. Yet, it didn’t acknowledge or advance the rethinking of an expanded concept of urban park. Hopefully, this commentary, in a small way, can advance that goal.

—Paul M. Bray

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