

PUBLIC NATURE



SCENERY, HISTORY, AND PARK DESIGN

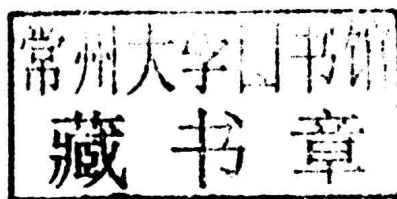
Edited by Ethan Carr, Shaun Eyring, and Richard Guy Wilson

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FOREWORD

It is perhaps arrogant of humans that we strive to improve on the design of nature. When we are tone deaf to nature's song or blind to her temper, she reminds us by sweeping our creations downstream in flood or into the air as smoke. When we attempt to compete with her grandeur we wind up looking crude. But when we use her as a teacher, we find a great guide, for nature has been designing our planet for a very long time. Teddy Roosevelt said of the Grand Canyon: "Leave it as it is. The ages have been at work on it and man can only mar it."

But in order to accommodate the recreation of all people as they stand along the rim of the Grand Canyon, there need to be roads, trails, and facilities of the sort constructed by the National Park Service. Park professional organizations at the city, county, and state levels must similarly build for the public's comforts and safety and enjoyment within nature. All these organizations do their job best when they draw their design from the lessons of nature. The natural parks of our country, in addition to offering their intrinsic beauty, remind us of the importance of these lessons. For example, President Abraham Lincoln set aside Yosemite during our Civil War, perhaps because he knew our country would need such places for healing.

Recently, scientists have been documenting that the historic range of variability of climate is no longer a viable standard upon which to design our park infrastructure. Nature is telling us that we need more flexibility and that in order to be sustainable into the future, we need to be ready to adapt and in some cases mitigate. Sustainability in our design and operations is now an imperative, not only to respond to the changes in climate but to demonstrate our leadership and sensitivity.

So too in our most important cultural sites must the design draw from sensitivity to the time, place, and people, and the events of the site that shaped our heritage. The cultural parks of our country are the places where civic engagements, often confrontational, occasionally bloody, have shaped who we are as a people: Selma to Montgomery, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Manzanar, the Statue of Liberty, and Flight 93. At such parks, national, state, and municipal, we learn not only of the people who left their marks on our future but also, through this intimate contact, how to take the next generation to a higher and better place.

The National Park Service encourages wide-ranging dialogues on the design and preservation issues in our national parks, and we learn from them. We do not necessarily endorse any specific opinions contained in the essays in this book, but we do support the spirit of inquiry they represent. Our parks are a collective

expression of who we are as a people, where our values were forged in the hottest fires. They deliver messages to future generations about the foundational experiences that have made America a symbol for the rest of the world. They are an aggregate of what we Americans value most about ourselves, including the willingness to impose self-restraint in setting aside these places of instruction, inspiration, and commemoration. Our great parks are also places where we pursue happiness, as a respite from a fast-paced and congested world. Never in its two hundred years has this nation needed more the National Park System and the other parks throughout our nation. They stand as a collective memory of where we have been, what sacrifices we have made to get here, and who we mean to be. By investing in the preservation, interpretation, and restoration of these symbolic places, we offer hope and optimism to each generation of Americans.

Jonathan B. Jarvis

Director, National Park Service

September 2012

PREFACE

The twenty-first century ushers in a renewed and intensified need for healthy, vibrant public parks. The design of parks and open space respects and responds to societal expectations most effectively when it profits from an awareness of the past. Previous park design decisions, overlaid with centuries of use, create a unique perspective to inform our decisions about the future character of public space. The view through the lens of these essays illustrates our rich, textured, yet complicated historic relationship with public parks and their role in society. The goal of *Public Nature: Scenery, History, and Park Design* is to provide public park managers, scholars, professors, practitioners, civic leaders, and others an opportunity to better understand the story of park design over time as it relates to current and future park designs.

The idea for this publication sprang from the creative synergy of a group of practitioners, academics, public park managers, and community activists—all of whom believe strongly that well-designed public parks and healthy communities have a direct and measurable relationship. Through this shared vision, the *Designing the Parks* partnership was born, comprised of innovative thinkers from the National Park Service, The Cultural Landscape Foundation, the University of Virginia, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, the Van Alen Institute, the National Parks Conservation Association, and the George Wright Society. Two conferences were held in 2008—one in Charlottesville, Virginia, and one in San Francisco—to explore the past, present, and future of park planning and design. Combined, these conferences attracted more than six hundred participants and inspired an international dialogue on public parks, their meaning throughout history, their influence on society, and their future design. Six design principles emerged from the conferences and have now become the cornerstone of *Designing the Parks* programs and activities. Moreover, participants were united in the belief that a foundational understanding of park design history is integral to any new park design process.

We would like to acknowledge the *Designing the Parks* partnership, whose focused vision, innovative thinking, and steadfast commitment gave this volume the staying power needed to move forward through its publication. In particular, Richard Guy Wilson's idea of researching the history of parks was the seed for the initiative; from this sprout, it grew into the much larger, robust *Designing the Parks* vision. Ethan Carr, Shaun Eyring, and Wilson selected and edited these essays and ensured that the publication contained a rounded, illustrative body of scholarship.

Jon Jarvis, Director, National Park Service; Sam Whittington, Director, Denver Service Center; and Sandy Walter, former NPS Northeast Regional Director (now deceased), brought leadership and credibility to the Designing the Parks initiative, as well as support for the bicoastal conferences and subsequent Designing the Parks pilot projects. Steve Whitesell, Dennis Reidenbach, and Randy Biallas provided continued support, national leadership, and perceptive insights as the initiative grew. All were strong voices in bringing diverse views into the discussion.

Charles Birnbaum, Executive Director of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, and Cathie Barner of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy brought their extraordinary design talents and ability to reach diverse audiences to enrich this dialogue. Jamie Hand, formerly of the Van Alen Institute, and Alex Brash of the National Parks Conservation Association both pushed the partnership to be inventive and think outside the box.

Maurice Cox contributed crucial perspectives both as a university professor and as the former Design Director of the National Endowment for the Arts. Randy Mason of the University of Pennsylvania offered ways of connecting to school design programs and including youth in the discussion. Eric Tamulonis, Principal, Wallace, Roberts, and Todd, provided constant support and offered the valuable insights of a private practitioner.

Rolf Diamant, Bob McIntosh, Woody Smeck, Elaine Jackson-Retondo, and Craig Kenkel of the National Park Service all provided support and ideas that enriched the Designing the Parks idea and gave life to the initiative at the park and region level. Emily Dekker-Fiala of the George Wright Society and Jan Harris, Pat Kenny, and Kerri Cahill of the National Park Service provided critical support for the design and facilitation of the two conferences.

Our indebted thanks to Kenny Marotta and the Cultural Landscape Foundation for providing outstanding copyediting and shepherding this publication through its final phases.

Finally, special thanks and recognition to Stephanie Toothman, National Park Service, Associate Director, Cultural Resources; and Rodger Evans, National Park Service, Chief, Design and Construction, Denver Service Center, Western Division. Stephanie's inspiring leadership engaged a national audience to think about park design broadly and inclusively. Rodger encouraged the Denver Service Center to rediscover its immense historical role and influence in park planning and design. Together, their unflagging support and creative ideas have ensured the agency's prominent role in the Designing the Parks initiative.

Please read this volume with a critical eye toward future park design.

Thank you.

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Introduction

The study of the history of park design has been hindered by uncertainty about what exactly defines a “park” and also about what would constitute “design” in such a setting. The word “park” is used to describe almost any landscape whether small or large, pastoral or paved. “Design” can mean almost any creative effort that involves a degree of utility as well as beauty and inspiration. The essays in this volume, which are remarkable for their diversity as well as their content, suggest that parks of very different types share related formal characteristics, cultural aspirations, and social implications. The places called parks are indeed various. But the histories of their implementation—their acquisition, planning, and development—reveal continuities with particular clarity. The histories presented here describe the physical and conceptual transformations of certain places into parks. Park design history, in this sense, allows us to appreciate how very different parks sometimes express common ideological purposes and economic motivations through related formal strategies of development. The practice of park making can be identified by shared theory and technologies applied within many realms, including urban parks, memorial landscapes, recreational meccas, and scenic reservations all over the world.

The thesis that binds these essays together is that park history is primarily a design history. This is not an assertion of human values over biological or other significance, but merely a recognition that parks often share a history of complex and continuing development and interpretation. This cultural attention, usually exercised for the benefit of a visiting “public,”

is the common attribute that allows for comparison, periodization, and other historical analyses of park landscapes. A remote wilderness area, as much as a municipal park or a commemorative battlefield, is a landscape set aside and managed ultimately for some level or type of public enjoyment and benefit. Enjoyment of one type of area obviously differs from that of another, and the phenomenon of tourism is as diverse as the individuals who undertake it. But parks share the attribute that they are defined by designations and designs that express cultural values. They are established through the thematic identification, bounding, and interpretation of a place, and by development (sometimes quite limited) intended to facilitate and shape the park experience. Governments and individuals design parks, in this sense, for ideological and economic purposes usually expressed in terms of a doctrine of public interest.

Park design, then, is not limited to the “designed” landscapes of urban parks, in which a site is typically altered to a significant degree. Central Park in New York would be the prototype of such a “man-made” landscape in the United States. As such it might be considered the antithesis of the “natural” landscape of, for example, the roughly contemporary state reservation created at Yosemite Valley in California. But these two great icons of park history—both of which were advocated in similar terms for their public benefits—neatly illustrate the continuity between two ends of a conceptual spectrum of park design. In the first case, the site required massive soil amendments, an extensive subsurface drainage system, excavations

to create lakes, and grading and planting that resulted in pastoral expanses that the designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, prescribed in 1858 as a necessary complement to the frantic and more enclosed spaces of the modern metropolis. These extensive improvements were nevertheless predicated on the existing conditions of the site chosen to become a park. Local geology, in particular, interested the designers, who used outcrops of bedrock to structure their plan and to create visual effects. The site was dramatically transformed, but also preserved as an “improved” iteration of itself: an idealized version of the preindustrial landscape of Manhattan Island. While in some areas this required extensive engineering, in others, such as the woodlands in the north end of the site, it required very little.

This process is comparable to the strategy Olmsted devised while in California in 1864 for how Yosemite Valley also could be transformed into a public park. Park design, in this case, involved some of the same features and policies as at Central Park, such as carriage drives, pedestrian paths, and a proscription of any building that would detract from the appreciation of landscape scenery. The purpose of this landscape design was also essentially the same, despite the vastly different geographic contexts of the two sites. Government acted in both examples to allow for thousands of park visitors at a time to have relatively free access to the area, move through it, and enjoy the emotional effects and benefits of appreciating scenery without destroying the landscape in the process. At Yosemite, of course, the scenery required no enhancement and any attempts to “improve” it in this sense would have been disastrous. But Olmsted knew that one day visitation to the valley would be counted in the millions, and the minimal park development he suggested for Yosemite Valley—park drives, paths, overlooks, camping amenities—would have facilitated public appreciation of the existing landscape while minimizing the degradation of the scenic but fragile wet meadows and oak woodlands that were essential elements of it.¹

Olmsted and Vaux described their profession as “landscape architecture,” and from the beginning the theory and practice they developed was closely linked to the implementation of park plans of all types. The purpose of large parks specifically, as Olmsted defined it, implied the physical development of a site—to a greater or lesser degree—in order to facilitate meaningful experiences of landscape scenery and effects. As the practice of park making evolved, the careful selection of sites for parks in advance made it possible for less to be done to achieve the same purposes. At Franklin Park in Boston in the 1880s, for example, the cost per acre to create the park was almost one-fifth of what it had been at Central Park. The result, nevertheless, was arguably more successful, at least in terms of creating powerful, inspiring experiences of large, pastoral landscapes. This was because the site had been carefully selected for its existing scenic qualities (mainly upland pastureland interspersed with wooded ledges of exposed rock), which then became the basis for the park landscape Olmsted developed. Elaborate subsurface drainage was unnecessary and the need for grading and soil amendment was reduced.²

To a significant degree, the history of park design is the history of landscape “preservation,” particularly in the United States, where both scenic and historic places were often preserved by turning them into parks. In some cases this might require as little improvement as possible, such as drives and paths to make an already scenic area more accessible. In others, major infrastructural or recreational programs required far more engineering and expense in the creation of public landscapes. The Back Bay Fens, for example, another of Olmsted’s Boston parks of the 1880s, had major flood control and water quality improvement functions. Runoff from a large urban drainage area was rechanneled, retained, and released into the Charles River in a public landscape that operated as a tidal wetland (which the site had once been), as well as a naturalistic respite from surrounding urbanization. To realize this heavily engineered landscape, the cost was

significantly higher per acre, roughly on a par with Central Park. But just a few years later, Olmsted's former apprentice (and later partner) Charles Eliot was also planning and advocating "scenic reservations" in the metropolitan region around Boston. These far larger, suburban parks were selected as representative examples of a typology of regional scenery, and Eliot's designs called for roads, paths, and other minimal park improvements that provided access for the public—and protected the landscape from them—but otherwise changed little.³

What Olmsted sometimes described as a "natural style" of landscape design was adaptable to the development of different large municipal parks, as well as larger scenic reservations outside cities. By the end of the century this practice of park making had been adapted to the "preservation" as well as the "improvement" of a wide range of selected scenic and historic places, which typically became parts of comprehensive "systems" of public parks that attempted to include representative examples of natural (and vernacular) landscape types, and also of historic scenes that embodied chosen narratives of group identity. In the setting of national parks in the United States, this approach underlay the National Park Service mandate in 1916 to preserve landscapes and wildlife "unimpaired" for the purpose of public "enjoyment," a core mandate for many park agencies still today.⁴ For state parks, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.'s 1929 plan for California epitomized a comparable approach to scenic and historic landscape preservation, which in this case became a model for New Deal comprehensive state park planning all over the country in the following decade.⁵

Seeing the connection between park design and landscape preservation requires an understanding of preservation as itself an active, essential transformation of a place, even if the intent of that transformation was to change as little as possible about an area's cultural character and natural condition. This is one of the most valuable insights that the study of park history can offer park managers and conservationists today. Landscape preservation implied

some level of landscape design, whether that design was expressed in extensive, engineered improvements or in minimal development intended to allow public access while preventing that use from degrading places already considered significant for their historical or biological resources. Preservation—when it involved park making—entailed conceptual and, at least limited, physical change of a place to be effective, at least if any form of public "enjoyment" was involved. From a historical perspective, then, landscape preservation and landscape design have never really been separate projects.

The investigations of the history of park design offered in this volume, however, come at a time of historical shifts in the practice. Many conservation organizations today prefer to describe their activities as "protecting landscapes," not making parks.⁶ The former phrase implies a more flexible, humanistic approach to conservation, working with indigenous peoples and local economies. The latter recalls the "Yellowstone model," now often disparaged because the approach required the absolute appropriation of a place (with attendant dispossession) in order to achieve a nevertheless imperfect biologic or historic preservation.⁷ But this distinction indicates an inadequate appreciation for some of the complexities of park design history. Whatever it is called, the imposition of a set of values on a place in order to "preserve," "protect," or merely "interpret" it inevitably involves the abrogation of at least some rights and access by one group in favor of another. The condemnations and evictions that partly defined park making in the nineteenth century were done with an overt ideological conviction that a larger and justifying interest was being served. At the very least, some aspects of the belief in a larger good that ethically supersedes at least some local preferences must remain even in the "new paradigm" of protecting cultural landscapes.

Park making has changed dramatically in recent decades, but only in some ways. The notion of a public interest, for example, also remains the most effective justification for true public funding. If a public interest is not

served by conservation activities, why should public taxation support them? If only a select group benefit, then fees collected from visitors or donations given by interested parties, not general treasury funds, should support landscape protection. A related observation can be made regarding the economic importance of parks. New models of landscape protection emphasize sustainable forms of economic exploitation that create vibrant local economies on a long-term basis. This was exactly the kind of suggestion that Progressive Era preservationists made in the United States, promising that “scenery” was the one “natural resource” that could be fully exploited for local and national economic benefit without significant depletion of it.⁸ Park improvements at many national parks in the United States included the construction of roads and hotels to facilitate regional tourism, which advocates pointed out would more than make up economically for the loss of logging and grazing opportunities. Proponents of the sustainable exploitation of tropical forest resources and the development of “eco-tourist” resorts evoke similar, if updated, potentials.

The history of park design should be of interest today not only because it contrasts with newer models for conservation and urban planning but because of the cogent lessons we can abstract from it to provide a thicker context for current practices. For example, historians have provided increasingly nuanced accounts of how powerful political and economic interests sponsored parks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹ The historical links between urban park planning and real estate speculators and developers, if not often described explicitly in contemporary records, have been well established subsequently. The creation of national parks all over the world just as plainly served ideological and economic interests of governments and of influential individuals. Park making has always been a collaboration of good and greed as much as a struggle against “the Almighty Dollar,” as Muir would have it.¹⁰ Throughout this volume, convergence of diverse political, economic, and

more selfless interests characterizes the histories of how and why parks were established and designed. Since the 1980s the success of public-private partnerships of many types has demonstrated that identifying and exploiting mutual benefits and converging interests have continued to be essential to making public parks.

Parks were made, not born, which is why these essays can be considered design histories. Through park making, governments have elaborated and deployed the most powerful of cultural constructions: nature and history. Parks have been a means to preserve apparently unimpaired past conditions—whether cultural or ecological—but they have done so as agents of modernization, that is, as components of larger patterns of landscape and social change. The great eras of park making in different parts of the world have come at different times, but always during eras of social, geographic, and ecological disruption. Preservation and park making, the scholars contributing to this volume remind us, are among the most remarkable of all cultural activities, since the landscapes they produce simultaneously enable, critique, embody, and reject violent, large-scale adaptations of geography and society for the purposes of modern, capitalist, and urban civilization.

The Essays

In the first section, John Dixon Hunt and Elizabeth Barlow Rogers explore the early cultural context for park design and establish essential continuities to European garden theorists and cultural figures who created an intellectual foundation essential to how a park designer such as Frederick Law Olmsted perceived landscapes. The picturesque as a mode of experience as well as of design, Hunt asserts, was linked to the phenomenon of modern tourism. The picturesque was indeed “about movement,” physical mobility as well as the “movement of the mind.” Landscape itself may not travel, Hunt concludes, but ideas do. European thought and design precedent are fundamental to considering American park design in the nineteenth century. No cultural current, in this