

By Paul M. Bray

The summer 2003 issue of Places 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.

In the last quarter century of the 20th century the idea of park has been moving beyond its man made 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 for cities goes back to Olmsted who envisioned parks systems including parkways as the organizing element for cities steering the flow of urban development. Historian David Schuyler who is the author of The New Urban Landscape found that that the Prospect Park assignment led Olmsted, "to a full realization that no single park, not matter how large and how well designed, would provide the citizens with the beneficial influences of nature". Louis Mumford declared, "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 20th century. Urban park historian Galen Cranz 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 4th era of urban parks. She declared that "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 19th 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 urban cultural park captured the civic aspirations. Urban refers to a settled area, Cultural is man's attainments that 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 some park like conditions like canal boat rides. In Lowell, the park plan was the urban plan for turning around a gritty city from a place where everything was perceived as dull, to a very interesting place.

After Lowell received national recognition that came, in part, at the cost of having to drop the name urban cultural park for National Historical Park preferred by Congress, the urban cultural park idea took hold in New York State first with 6 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 17 unit State Heritage Area System. 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 increasing alike and 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 best bet 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 of a whole urban setting or region as it is in the case of New York six million acre Adirondack Park.

On the regional level of nature parks, Italian urban and national park planner Roberto Gambino has advanced the provocation that nature parks are obsolete. He has written that 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 be considered 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 was used to define coherent settled areas including whole cities and groupings of neighboring cities sharing over arching 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 and environment of complete 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 USA to participate in international efforts to curb global warming, the Kyoto climate change agreement and other international environmental conventions are increasing drawing all of our lives and communities into a regime of stewardship more traditionally associated with parks. Stewardship is now a global necessity for our whole wherever we may live.

For more than 1 quarter century I have fostered 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 regional Adirondack Park with both 130,000 residents and almost 3 million acres of Constitutionally protected wild forest land is more than 100 years old and is still called a park in the painful process of becoming a park. 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 potentials without the time or will to rethink traditional and accepted notions of urban parks and put a foundation under them under the expanded notion of park.

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 article in a small way can advance that rethinking.

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