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Parks as Places:
What's on Our Bookshelves

What makes a park a beloved place in a community? At Project for Public Spaces we have spent twenty-eight years watching, researching and listening to communities, and helping guide them through the visioning and design process. And over the years we have sifted through many books in search of answers and techniques. As anyone knows who has visited our offices, our bookshelves are stocked with volumes on what makes a place great.

How does one get a handle on all this material? Is there an essential reading list of material on great parks? One way to approach this question may be to identify critical attributes that most active, social places share, and then sort through some of the best writing in each area.

At PPS we have identified four key attributes of successful parks. A good park place provides a range of things to do ("uses and activities"). It must be easy to get to and connected to the surrounding community ("access and linkages"). It must be safe, clean, and attractive ("comfort and image"). And, perhaps, most important, it must be a place to meet other people ("sociability"). These four characteristics provide a useful lens through which to examine some of the most important writing on parks.

Activities and Uses

"City parks are not abstractions," wrote Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life Great American Cities* (Vintage, 1961). "They mean nothing divorced from their practical tangible uses, and hence they mean nothing divorced from the tangible effects on them — for good or for ill — of the city districts and uses touching them."

Jacobs's famous book calls out the dynamic that still befuddles communities, city planners, and designers. No two parks should be alike, because no two neighborhoods are exactly alike. What types of activities make parks community magnets? One way to identify these activities is to use an asset map. This tool, developed by John McNight and John P. Kretzmann of Northwestern University, and elucidated in their *Building Community from the Inside Out* (ACTA Publications, 1997) surveys a community based on its strengths and abilities. Artists, gardeners, and other community "assets" can then be mustered for the cause. Chess groups, music groups, or any of the myriad community organizations, small or large, can find a home within a park, when the redevelopment or design process acts to include them from the beginning.

Addressing uses in this way is in direct contrast to typical "recreation" model of building tennis courts and basketball hoops and expecting people to come to them. In his book *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (Yale, 1996), J.B. Jackson attributes the loss of community in America to the decline of park use. With more people seeking recreational activities in malls and sports arenas — self-contained structures, largely privately owned with ties only to their neighboring parking lots — parks have been left behind. Tapping into community assets can be part of the solution, showing that parks offer a community-inspired and very public alternative to these more private, and expensive models.

In addition, clustering uses and edge activities is equally important. When a park provides a place for people to ice skate and also an area nearby where people can sit and talk, get warm, and get something to eat or drink, its chances of becoming a good place are increased, simply because there are numerous things to do. A good place should be regularly available so that people can rely on

it when the chatting whim strikes. *The Great Good Place* by Ray Oldenburg (Marlow and Co., 1999) identifies neighborhood spots that act as the glue of their communities, drawing people to them for companionship and relaxation. Examples might be a neighborhood bocce court, a corner bar, a coffeehouse, or a playground — all are places characterized by popular informality. Lyn Lofland's *The Public Realm* (Aldine De Gruyter, 1998) helps to explain why people use some public open spaces while avoiding others.

Comfort and Image

Good details can tantalize — they signal that someone took the time and energy to design amenities that welcome, intrigue, or help. Two books in particular are packed with thoughtful design ideas and design guidelines. They are *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village* (City Comforts Press, 1995) by planner/developer David Sucher; and *People Places: Design Guidelines for Urban Open Spaces* (Wiley, 1997), edited by Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis. Both include advice on designing such things as community bulletin boards, restrooms, shade trees, child-friendly niches, and bike racks.

Another classic in this field is *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (PPS, 1980) by urbanologist William Whyte. Among other things, Whyte talks about the importance of movable seating. When two thousand movable chairs were scattered on the lawn of Bryant Park, it helped transformed that once-notorious space on New York's 42nd Street into a one of Midtown's most popular outdoor hangouts. As Whyte noted long ago, "People like to sit where there are places to sit."

Access and Linkage

A good place is easy to see and easy to get to — people want to see that there is something to do, that others have been successfully enticed to enter. On the other hand, if a park is not visible from the street or the street is too dangerous for older people and children to cross, the park won't be used. The more successful a place is, the more the success will feed upon itself. Sometimes, if a place is really good, people will walk through it even if they were headed somewhere else. Tony Hiss's *The Experience of Place* (Vintage, 1991) explores how people look ahead to orient themselves: "We let the layout of a place give us an advance reading on such things as whether we can linger there or need to keep on moving."

Transit and access became a major preoccupation with park planners in the nineteenth century, as street car lines, trolleys and parkways were developed to facilitate the movement of people into parks, but the best way to arrive at a park is on foot. Olmsted designed entire systems of parkways in Brooklyn and Buffalo to lead people to his regional parks. For smaller parks, proximity is everything. In *A Pattern Language* (Oxford, 1977) Christopher Alexander notes, "The only people who make full, daily use of parks are those who live less than three minutes from them. The other people in a city who live more than three minutes away, don't need parks any less; but distance discourages use and so they are unable to nourish themselves, as they need to do."

Sociability

A sociable place is one where people want to go to observe the passing scene, meet friends, and celebrate interaction with a wide range of people that are different from themselves. Their users can anticipate lively conversations with the "regulars," "characters," and other neighbors. According to Ray Oldenburg, in good places every person is known for their social self, not as an employee or family member — roles, he says, that can make people feel like they are in straightjackets from which they long to escape. A good place also encourages people to "sit and set a spell." Being able to sit, converse or just look at passersby is key.

"People come where people are" says an old Scandinavian proverb quoted by Jan Gehl in his classic *Life Between Buildings* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987). Gehl's meticulous study of Copenhagen reveals a love for the exacting practice of people watching in public spaces. Gehl's long-term research on Copenhagen's walking streets and squares is brought up to date in his more recent *Public Spaces Public Life* (Danish Architectural Press, 1996).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the promenades of seaside resorts and beaches such as Coney Island in Brooklyn, NY, and Hoboken, NJ, were lined with popular attractions such as food sellers, shooting matches, and horseshoe pitching. This focus on social and recreational activities and amusement in parks was supplanted by the great picturesque parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and others that still frame what people think of as parks. Cranz, whose *The Politics of Park Design* (MIT Press, 1982) has set the stage for all studies of American parks, wrote that park officials in the nineteenth century discouraged loud activities in favor of leisurely strolls and appreciation of the beauties of nature. Cranz notes that Olmsted discouraged many active uses and actively fought against flower gardens, because, he felt, they showed too obviously the "hand of man."

However, Olmsted's intention was not, as many people think, to create vast, seemingly empty, pastoral landscapes. He saw parks as essential democratic tools, helping to bring people together on equal terms. In an 1870 essay, Olmsted wrote, "Men must come together, and must be seen coming together, in carriages, on horseback and on foot, and the concourse of animated life must in itself be made an attractive and diverting spectacle." See *Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Supplementary Series, Vol. I (Johns Hopkins, 1997).

General Sources

There are some sources that do not fit into these categories neatly, yet belong on the bookshelf of every informed practitioner.

One key factor working in virtually every successful park in the U.S. is the active backing of an interested community — whether this be a loosely affiliated group of volunteers or an organized nonprofit conservancy of gardeners, programming specialists, and administrators. *Public Parks, Private Partners* (PPS, 2000) is a study of the range of parks organizations now operating in the U.S. It describes what roles they play in their locale, and what relationships they have to pertinent city and regional administrations.

Probably the most successful example of a nonprofit organization rising to the task of managing a park effectively, is New York's Central Park Conservancy. Elizabeth Barlow Rogers' *Rebuilding Central Park: A Management and Restoration Plan* (MIT Press, 1987), is part philosophy, part planning, and well worth reading.

Public Space (Cambridge University Press, 1992) by architect Stephen Carr, landscape architect Mark Francis, environmental psychologist Leanne Rivlin and planner Andrew Stone provides a comprehensive view of what makes good public spaces including parks, streets and squares. They outline three dimensions required for successful open spaces — needs, rights and meanings, and suggest through several case studies approaches for improved design and management. Another good general resource is *Urban Parks and Open Space* (ULI, 1999) edited by Alexander Garvin and Gayle Berens. This documents innovative success stories in urban park management and fundraising around the country. For example, it provides insight into the success of Post Office Square in Boston and Bryant Park in New York. The book lends credence to an important adage at PPS that "the success of any public space is 80 percent management." *Community Open Spaces* (Island Press, 1984) by Mark Francis, Lisa Cashdan, and Lynn Paxson examines the role of community management and control in making successful open spaces.

The only survey of city park systems, in terms of acreage and dollars allocated, is Peter Harnik's *Inside City Parks* (ULI, 1999). This is a useful touchstone for anyone wondering whether their city is up to par. Finally, I should mention our own *How to Turn a Place Around* (PPS, 2000). This publication discusses many important aspects of the management, community involvement, design and organization that can be used to create active, lively public spaces. For those in need of further material, both PPS's Urban Parks Institute and APA's City Parks Forum (www.planning.org/cpf) have more comprehensive bibliographies on line.

—Andrew Wiley-Schwartz