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Parks for Livable Cities: Lessons from a Radical Mayor

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God made us walking animals: pedestrians. Just as a fish needs to swim, a bird to fly, a deer to run, we need to walk — not in order to survive, but to be happy. A bird can survive inside a small cage and even bear descendants, but one suspects the bird would be happier flying free. Likewise, we can survive inside an apartment all our lives, but we are happier if we can walk and run as we wish.

The importance of public pedestrian spaces in our cities cannot be measured. We cannot prove mathematically that wider sidewalks, pedestrian streets, and more or better parks make people happier — much less measure how much happier. However, if we reflect, we will realize that most things that are important in life — friendship, beauty, love and loyalty — cannot be measured. Parks and other pedestrian places are essential to happiness in our cities.

Today, cities in the Third World are continuing to grow at astonishing rates. Most will more than double their built area during the next fifty years so that by 2015 there will be some twenty-two megacities of more than ten million inhabitants in Third World countries. Considering their global impact, one would think environmental sustainability and quality of life would be major concerns in such places. Yet, pressed with everyday urgencies, Third World cities have shown little creativity in these areas.

As Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, a city of seven million inhabitants, I was convinced of the importance of parks in addressing this issue. During my administration, which ended December 31, 2000, we invested in water and sewerage supply, schools and libraries, housing for the poor, and transportation systems. But beyond education, we didn't have a higher priority than public spaces. Pedestrian streets, sidewalks, greenways, bicycle paths, metropolitan parks, neighborhood parks, and plazas — altogether my administration set out to create or rehabilitate more than 1,300 parks. We envisioned these as places of respect for the more vulnerable of society's members: the poor, the old, and children. Most of all, our development model was to give priority to children and public space — and to restrict private car use.

Some time ago I was impressed by a documentary about herons in a Brazilian wetland. As child herons were learning to fly, some would fall in the water, where crocodiles promptly devoured them. As I was feeling sympathetic toward the herons, I realized the children in cities faced

Above: Parks are important to a democratic society because they are one of the few places where people meet as equals. Photo courtesy Project for Public Spaces.

a similar predicament. As they leave their homes, they risk being run over by a car. This is not theory. Thousands of children the world over are killed by cars every year. City children grow up in fear of cars as children of the Middle Ages once feared wolves.

And yet, as mayor, I was almost impeached for trying to remove cars from sidewalks, which car-owners had illegally appropriated for parking. I faced enormous resistance when I took down fences that illegally enclosed parkland for private use in some neighborhoods. I was even sued for trying to build greenways that would connect lower-income neighborhoods with upper-income areas.

Parks and Social Equality

Parks play many nonobvious roles in constructing a society. However, one of the most important is to make cities more egalitarian. In the U.S. Declaration of Independence, we find some principles expressed marvelously: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. . . .”

Much of the world has accepted that the best economic system is some form of capitalism: that is, all people are better off if most of society’s resources are managed through private property. Yet, if we truly believe in a society of equals, we must have a few minimum conditions. In other words, a minimum of public goods must be available to all citizens on equal conditions if society is to hold together and advance toward happiness. I am speaking here not of equality of income, but equality of dignity, equality and quality of life — equality in the pursuit of human development and happiness.

At first, it may seem that in Third World cities, with so many unmet needs, parks would be a frivolity. But in practice, where citizens lack so much in terms of amenities and consumption, it is quicker and more effective to elevate the quality of life through public goods such as parks, than by increasing people’s incomes. It is impossible to provide every citizen with consumer goods and services; it is possible to give them excellent schools, libraries, sidewalks and parks.

Parks and other public pedestrian spaces are critical if we desire to make Third World societies more equal. Indeed, it is during leisure time that income differences in our cities are felt most acutely. Higher-income people can drive to the countryside, or go to clubs and restaurants. But for the poor, the main alternatives to television take place in the public realm. For this reason, high-quality public space in general, and parks in particular, are

evidence of true democracy at work.

Even looking at such public spaces may provide satisfaction. As Mayor of Bogotá, I was lucky to have a window overlooking the Plaza de Bolívar, our country’s historical central square. I would get up from my desk dozens of times a day and look through the window, and it never ceased to soothe me, to give me joy. Children running after the doves, a couple having their picture taken with the cathedral in the background — even when the rain poured down and the square was empty, there was magic. At a profound level, looking at a pedestrian space is looking at land fertile for human life.

Following this philosophy, our work in Bogotá included efforts to improve the public realm in marginal neighborhoods through citizen involvement. We planted 100,000 trees, created a new bus-based transit system, and turned a deteriorated downtown avenue into a dynamic public space. My idea for a car-free day was widely supported. And through a referendum, people adopted a yearly car-free day. They even voted, from 2015 on, to restrict all car circulation throughout the city during rush hours.

The Human Benefits of Parks

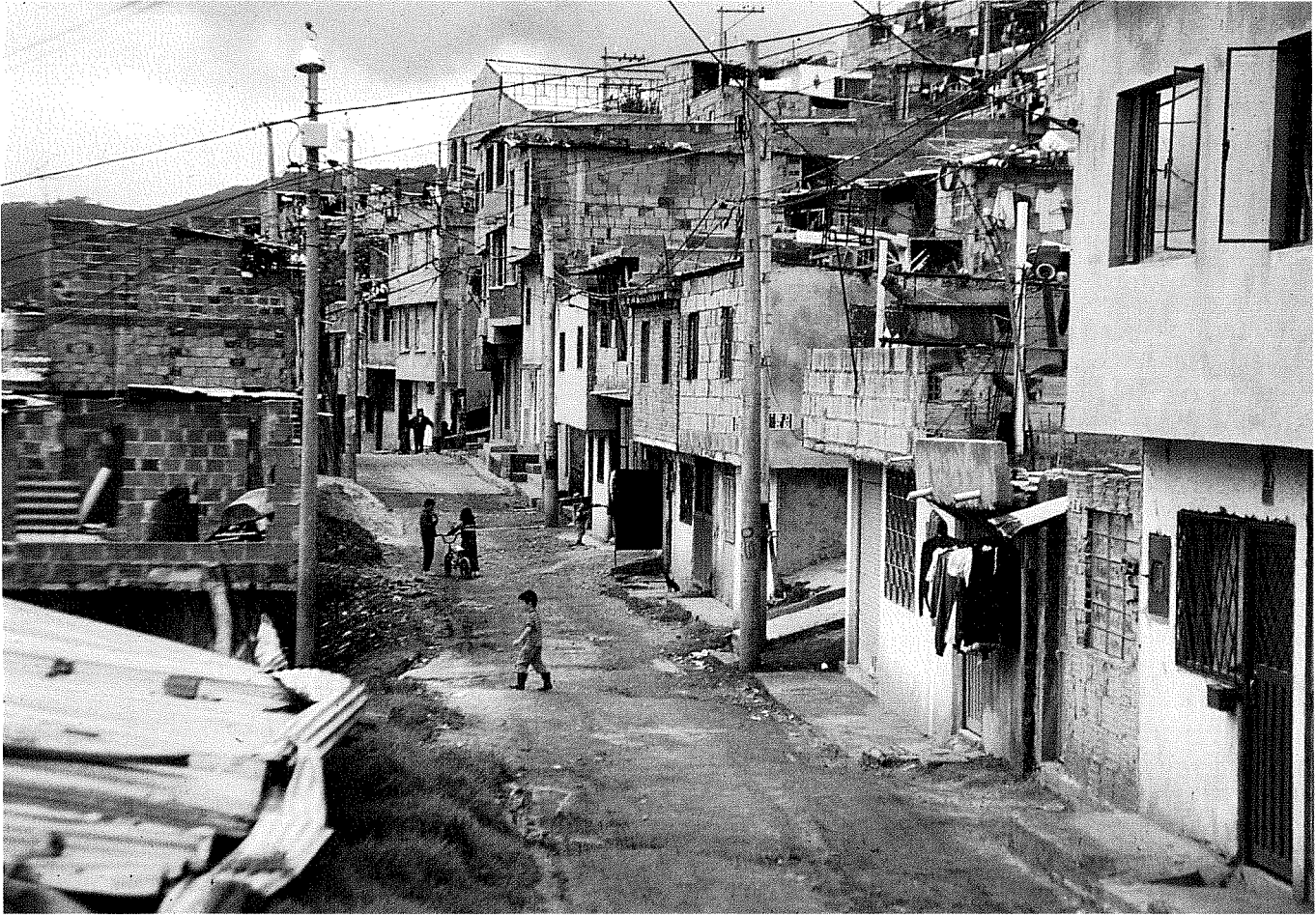
Parks serve human needs that are difficult to quantify. For example, human beings need to be with others, even with strangers. That is why crowded restaurants are more attractive than empty ones; why people like going to the beach rather than sunbathing on a terrace; why people prefer attending a concert to watching a DVD at home. Parks are valued as places to be with other people.

The evidence is all around: children often prefer neighborhood parks to large, beautiful suburban gardens. And Jan Gehl, a Danish urban expert, has found that the benches most people refer are not those facing most idyllic vistas, but those that most people walk by.

Parks are also important to a democratic society because they are one of the few places where people meet as equals. The CEO perhaps meets the janitor in the workplace — but from his position of power. Parks integrate people from different social and economic backgrounds, and people from different communities.

Of course, it is good for us park lovers to see any resource go to parks. But my experience has also led me to distrust schemes to funnel private funds to parks. I fear the effect of a growing reliance on private money. One ends up with perfect parks in richer areas and substandard situations in poorer areas. Why not let road maintenance — not parks — depend on private contributions and organizational schemes?

Parks are different from other public goods in that they



are valued in and of themselves, not simply as a means to an end. A road is valuable as a means for moving from one place to another — losing use of it, or having it riddled with potholes, produces dissatisfaction. But a normally functioning road system does not produce any special satisfaction. Parks are almost the opposite. When people don't have parks, they may not be conscious they are missing anything important. But a high-quality park provides countless satisfactions; and, marvelously, the pleasure derived from such a place does not wear away with time.

For example, in one of Bogotá's poorest sectors we built a 17-kilometer-long, 15-meter-wide pedestrian street. As it was located near the edge of the city, only minor demolitions were required. Lined with trees, benches and lamps, with a bike path on it, the Porvenir promenade, as it came to be called, has already changed the quality of life for 800,000 people. Tens of thousands of people walk there daily — to the library, to school, to the bus station, or nowhere in particular. They ride bicycles; they meet their neighbors.

What is remarkable is that in the area of the Porvenir almost all the streets are unpaved. Traditional logic dictated that we should use any available resources to pave some of these. But parked and moving vehicles would soon have occupied all this new paved space to the exclusion of all other users. And this would have changed little about the way people could live in this part of the city. Instead, the promenade was a large investment that served to remind us of something very obvious yet usually ignored: that the city is not for vehicles, but for children and the elderly, for families and neighbors — for people. It was an investment in human dignity, in a sense of belonging, in community building. Motor vehicle roads will be paved someday anyway. For now, the priority is to build a new and better way of living.

Contact with Nature

Public space is a precious, minute piece of the planet where human beings are entitled to wander freely. Yet in most Third World cities it is brutally encroached upon, mainly for parking cars. This has the effect of reducing its potential as living space for those who need it most. In developing countries, the authorities complacently overlook the trespass of motor vehicles, even on sidewalks, because it is the upper classes that benefit. Those who lose out are mainly the weaker, poorer members of society.

I must emphasize that wanting the poor to improve their state is often different than wanting people to be equal. In Third World cities, most upper-class people want the poor to be better off, but not equal. I also have

a Labrador dog I love very much. I feed her and take her to a good veterinarian. When my family and I moved to the U.S., we brought Dorotea Peñalosa with us. And all that is fine — as long as Dorotea does not feel she can sit at the table with us.

But, after all, the same is true in the U.S. A few years ago, a judge ruled that a beach park which the high-income city of Greenwich, Connecticut, had kept gated for the exclusive use of its residents, had to be opened to the general public. I am certain that most Greenwich residents wanted the poor to be happy; they just didn't want them to share their beach. Millions of people live within a few miles of Long Island Sound. But if they have no access to it, they might as well live a thousand miles away.

Clearly, nobody should be excluded from visiting unique natural resources such as coastlines, riverbanks and mountains. These are God's gift to mankind. Yet, even in the U.S., this is a battle that never goes away. Just last year a federal District Court ruled that legislation creating the California Coastal Commission, which oversees public access to California's thousand-mile coastline, was unconstitutional.

There is without a doubt a basic human need to have contact with nature — to see a few trees, some birds, a butterfly. For Americans, coming from a culture where parks have been profoundly important, it is difficult to imagine growing up in a city of several million inhabitants without the possibility of going to the countryside. Yet this is the reality for many people in cities in developing nations. A park is the closest many of them may get to nature. The effect is particularly telling in the lives of children.

At this time, my country is being ravaged by violence. But I am certain that if our children were happier we would be well advanced toward a solution. I have no doubt that parks are an important step toward a more convivial, constructive, and civilized urban future.

Opposite top: A lack of parks means many of the unimproved streets in a city like Bogotá must double as places for play. When resources are expended to improve them, they are only usurped by vehicles, to the exclusion of all other users. Photo courtesy Project for Public Spaces.

Opposite bottom: New public spaces, both downtown and in residential neighborhoods, dramatically improve the livability of a city like Bogotá. Photo courtesy Project for Public Spaces.