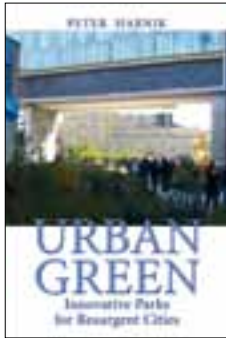


# An Excerpt: Urban Parks in the 21st Century United States



Text by Peter Harnik

This essay is excerpted from Mr Harnik's book, *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities*, published by Island Press in 2010:

National parks may guard and highlight the totemic landscapes and stories of the nation, but city parks are where we spend most of our park time--toddling as babies, competing as children, hanging out as teens, courting, bringing families, taking visitors, and sitting on benches when exhausted. We go *to* them, walk *through* them, look *at* them, dream *of* them. And the greatest, from Balboa Park in San Diego to Forest Park in St. Louis to Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, often become the very symbols of their cities, the central touchstones of memory and experience for residents and tourists alike.

A major problem for advocates and managers is that parks seem relatively simple and straightforward. In fact, they are immensely complicated. People frequently say, "It's not rocket science, it's just a park." Or, "If you think parks are tough, you should see how difficult highways are." No! For highways you need to be good at math. Parks require math plus horticulture, hydrology, psychology, sociology, and communication. If you want proof, go to any freeway onramp and look at the sign: "This Is a Limited Access Highway--No Hitchhiking, Pedestrians, Bicycles, Farm Equipment, Animal-Drawn Vehicles, Push-Carts," and so on, and so forth. If it doesn't fit their parameters, they ban it. You can't do that with a park.

Even the preeminent urbanist Jane Jacobs, who loved great parks, realized what a wrenching challenge they can be. Writing in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she said:

Parks are volatile places. They tend to run to extremes of popularity and unpopularity. Their behavior is far from simple. They can be delightful features of city districts, and economic assets to their surroundings as well, but pitifully few are. They can grow more beloved and valuable with the years, but pitifully few show this staying power. For every Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, or Rockefeller Plaza or Washington Square in New York, or Boston Common, or their loved equivalents in other cities, there are dozens of dispirited city vacuums called parks, eaten around with decay, little used, unloved.

In January 1954, in an orange grove far outside Los Angeles, ground was broken for Disneyland. Fifty years later, in July 2004, on top of a rail yard in the heart of Chicago, the ribbon was cut for Millennium Park. Halfway between those two events, in December 1980 in New York City, the Central Park Conservancy was incorporated. Three very different cities, three momentous occurrences; together they may well serve as the urban park cultural brackets of the Baby Boom generation.

From the moment Disneyland opened it became the new paradigm of a park experience--corporate, programmed, extravagant, rural, flawless, and electrifying. It was not a coincidence that after Disneyland opened, the old urban park systems--unprogrammed, democratic, unpredictable, and free--began grinding down relentlessly everywhere from Franklin Park in Boston to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. There was something completely new in the air and it was exciting: the park experience could be sanitized! Social classes could be segregated! Suburban backyards would meet most of the old city park needs and Disneyland--or the concept of Disneyland--would pick up the rest.

By 2004 those original Disneyland children had gray hair, aching backs, and worn-out knees. The thrill of spending \$400 for a family trip to an amusement park had faded. The suburban backyard was becoming a hassle and the stairs to the second floor tedious. An apartment downtown seemed intriguing, particularly if it was near . . . that fabulous new Millennium Park. No thrill rides (thank God!), but their more mature equivalents: eye-popping sculpture, wonderful fountains, concerts every week, a sumptuous garden that changed with the seasons, theater, bicycle parking, ice skating in the winter (do you think we can still skate?), two restaurants, a serpentine bridge that wowed visiting relatives, a constant stream of interesting humanity to watch, and finally, a sense of being back in the center of things.

People frequently say, "It's not rocket science, it's just a park." Or, "If you think parks are tough, you should see how difficult highways are." No! For highways you need to be good at math. Parks require math plus horticulture, hydrology, psychology, sociology, and communication.

Meanwhile, back in New York, where the city park movement had initially ignited in the 1860s, Central Park was the scene of a different and highly un-American kind of experiment--the unprecedented attempt not to replace an old icon but to gloriously refurbish it. Beginning with wealthy and influential park neighbors looking out for their own safety, views, and property values, the conservancy evolved into a sophisticated and admired spouse of the city parks department, seemingly knowing every step of the complicated dance that is the daily relationship between a city and its greatest park.

Millennium Park exploded onto the urban scene with an impact not felt since Central Park was unveiled. Central Park itself clawed its way back from urban embarrassment to civic Cinderella over a period of several decades. In both cases, the price tag approached half a billion dollars. In both cases the metropolitan effect--from property value to tourism to unforgettability and civic pride to just plain fun--was priceless. Today it is close to unimaginable for a tourist visiting either city not to sample one of those parks. Even more significant, the buzz is affecting virtually every other place, too. Stunning new parks have opened in Boston, Atlanta, Houston, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Santa Fe, and Denver, and extraordinarily successful conservancies have been revamping great old parks in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Brooklyn, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Houston. Frankly, there is hardly a city worth its salt not considering some kind of new or revamped green gathering spot around which to design a swinging downtown. Disneyland technically might still be fun, but that paradigm no longer rules. 