

Learning from The Success of The World's Great Parks

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Images as credited

For many years and in many cities throughout the world, parks have played a pivotal role in shaping the success of cities. The first formal “parks,” such as Central Park in New York City, were created in the 19th century to be passive and beautiful, in contrast to the dense and dirty reality of urban life. However, they were, in the long run, a collection of important destinations and places. The Sailboat Pond in Central Park is a good example of such a “place,” and remains both a destination in the park and a place to enjoy nature.

Later, parks were planned as part of a broader, inter-connected “open space system,” which also included town squares, plazas, greenways and a variety of other types of spaces: just about everything in a city that is not a building or a road. This suggests that the full range of benefits that open space can provide to cities was understood. However, the quality of public spaces and public life in most cities suggests that we do not fully understand this benefit. In fact, we have not even scratched the surface of the impact parks could have on the revitalisation of communities.

If urban parks can evolve from their current, primarily recreational role, into a new role as a catalyst for community development and enhancement, parks will be an essential component in transforming and enrich-

ing our cities. A park and its surrounding area can not only be a place to understand and relate to nature, but also a place for social and cultural exchange. A park can be alive and teeming with: entrepreneurial activities, such as markets; physical activities, such as children playing or people skating, walking or jogging; cultural activities, such as art and community events; or simply socialising with friends.

The world's great parks are multi-use destinations that define the city's identity through the variety of uses — educational, cultural, and commercial — that are all open and available to all visitors to enjoy for free. They allow you to visit, become involved and stay awhile. These destinations are not defined by architecture or design elements, but rather the uses these features support.

So the question is: why do some parks succeed as lively public spaces while others fail? With the importance of parks growing in the public's consciousness, now is the right time to revisit the question of what distinguishes great parks from all of the rest. Of course, there's no magic formula that yields a perfect park every time. But the true standouts, the parks that define the identities of their cities, tend to share certain elements that together explain a great deal of their success.

Qualities of Successful Parks

Based on the hundreds of parks the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has analysed and observed, including the good and bad, what stands out most is that design is only a small fraction of what goes into making a great park. To really succeed, a park must take into account a host of factors that extend beyond its physical dimensions.

1. Image and Identity

Historically, parks and squares were the centre of communities, and they helped to shape the identity of entire cities. Think of New York City without Central Park or Paris without Luxembourg Gardens. Today, in the United States, there has been a significant re-emergence of parks as the centre of civic life – examples include Campus Martius Park in Detroit, Michigan and Discovery Green in Houston, Texas.

2. Attractions and Destinations

Any great park has a variety of smaller “places” within it to appeal to various people. These can include outdoor cafés, fountains, sculpture, or a bandshell for performances. These attractions don't need to be big to make the park a success. In fact, some of the best parks have numerous small attractions, such as a vendor cart or playground, that, when put together, draw people throughout the day. We often use the idea of “The Power of Ten” to set goals for destinations within a park. Creating ten good places, each with ten things to do, offers a full programme for a successful park.

3. Amenities

A park should feature amenities that make it comfortable for people to use. A bench or waste receptacle in just the right location can make a big difference in how people choose to use a place. Lighting can strengthen a square's identity while highlighting specific activities, entrances, or pathways. Public art can be a great magnet for children of all ages to come together. Whether temporary or permanent, a good amenity will help to establish a convivial setting for social interaction.

4. Flexible Design

The use of a park changes during the course of the day, week and year. To respond to these natural fluctuations, flexibility needs to be built in. Instead of a permanent stage, for example, a retractable or temporary stage could be used. Likewise, it is important to have on-site storage for movable chairs, tables, umbrellas and games, so they can be used at a moment's notice.

5. Seasonal Strategy

A successful park can't flourish with just one design or management strategy. Great parks, such as Bryant Park, the plazas of Rockefeller Center, and Detroit's new Campus Martius, change with the seasons. Skating rinks, outdoor cafés, markets, horticulture displays, art and sculpture help adapt our use of the space from one season to the next.

6. Access

To be successful, a park needs to be easy to get to. The best parks are always easily accessible by foot: surrounding streets are narrow; crosswalks are well marked; lights are timed for pedestrians, not vehicles; traffic

moves slowly; and transit stops are located nearby. A square surrounded by lanes of fast-moving traffic will be cut off from pedestrians and deprived of its most essential element: people.

7. The Inner Square and the Outer Park

Visionary park planner Frederick Law Olmsted's idea of the “inner park” and “outer park” is just as relevant today as it was over 100 years ago. The streets and sidewalks around a park greatly affect its accessibility and use, as do the buildings that surround it. Imagine a park fronted on each side by 15-foot blank walls – that is the worst-case scenario for the outer square. Then, imagine that same park situated next to a public library: the library doors open right onto the park; people sit outside and read on the steps; maybe the children's reading room has an outdoor space right on the park, or even a bookstore and cafe. An active, welcoming outer park is essential to the well-being of the inner park.

8. Reaching Out Like an Octopus

Just as important as the edge of a park is the way that streets, sidewalks and ground floors of adjacent buildings lead into it. Like the tentacles of an octopus extending into the surrounding neighborhood, the influence of a good square (such as Union Square in New York) starts at least a block away. Vehicles slow down, walking becomes more enjoyable, and pedestrian traffic increases. Elements within the park are visible from a distance, and the ground floor activity of buildings entices pedestrians to move toward the park.

9. The Central Role of Management

The best places are ones that people return to time and time again. The only way to achieve this is through a management plan that understands and promotes ways of keeping the square safe and lively. For example, a good manager understands existing and potential users and gears events to both types of people. Good managers become so familiar with the patterns of how people use the park that waste receptacles get emptied at just the right time and refreshment stands are open when people most want them. Good managers create a feeling of comfort and safety in a park, fixing and maintaining it so that people feel assured that someone is in charge.

10. Diverse Funding Sources

A well-managed park is generally beyond the scope of the average city park or public works department, which is why partnerships have been established to operate most of the best parks in the United States. These partnerships seek to supplement what the city can provide with funding from diverse sources, including but not limited to: rent from cafés, markets or other small commercial uses on the site; taxes on adjacent properties; film shoots; and benefit fundraisers.

World's Best Parks

We offer here a list of a few of the truly outstanding parks in the world. Each example highlights the qualities of successful parks.



Luxembourg Gardens, Paris, France

A 60-acre park known for its extraordinary public amenities, including fountains, sculpture, ponds, flowerbeds, tennis courts, pony rides, a marionette theatre, playgrounds, food kiosks and open-air cafes.

Why It Works

The Luxembourg Gardens may well be one of the most successful parks in the world, partly because it is so well-integrated into the fabric of the city around it, which makes it easily accessible. There are also many things to do there, evidenced by the wide range of people who use it: children, older people, Sorbonne students, people cutting through on a lunch break, etc. People come to stroll, play chess, sit and read, people watch, sit at one of the cafes or bring their children or grandchildren to one of the many attractions for kids. Organised activities at the park include tennis, pony rides, puppet theatres, and toy sailboat rental (children float them in the large central fountain). Visitors can also stop inside the Palais and attend a hearing of the French Senate, which is open to the public.

The Gardens also host innovative exhibits, such as one of aerial photographs from around the world, encased in plastic and displayed on the fence surrounding the garden; a large wooden platform displayed a map showing the sites of the photographs, with slippers provided for people who wanted to walk on it – which many did.



History & Background

The Gardens came about as a result of Henri IV's assassination in 1610. His wife, Marie de Medicis, could not continue living in the Louvre with his memory. She had the Palais du Luxembourg and the surrounding gardens built to replicate her childhood home, Florence's Palazzo Pitti. The Luxembourg Gardens were completed in 1625, but did not reach their present dimensions until 1790. The park has been open to the public since the 17th century. The construction of nearby streets and avenues during the Second Empire reduced its size, but not its general appearance.

Some of the Gardens' more notable features include the Medicis Fountain, erected in 1861, and a bronze replica of the Statue of Liberty. The park, which closes at sunset, also has a multitude of strolling paths, and is filled with hundreds of movable chairs, which can be rented. Outdoor concerts also occur in the Luxembourg Gardens.

The design is basically formal: a central parterre dominated by terraces. Allees of trees surround the central terraces and continue in every direction, except north, where the Palais du Luxembourg dominates. A free, more English-style garden is situated along Rue Guynemer and Rue Auguste-Comte; it was built during the first Empire and contains winding paths, grassy open areas, and a wide array of sculpture.

OPPOSITE Visitors enjoy the numerous seating options, amenities and attractions at Luxembourg Gardens, Paris, France;

BELOW The Great Lawn, Central Park, New York, NY, USA (Photo: Joe Shlabotnik, Flickr Creative Commons).



Central Park, New York, USA

Olmsted and Vaux's design for Manhattan's largest park became the standard-bearer for parks across the United States.

Why It Works

Central Park ranks among the world's outstanding public places because of its influential original design and its current management. Since its inception, Central Park's much-imitated design has accommodated a variety of activities for New Yorkers, and the vision of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux has proven timeless in that it is still highly suitable for today's park users.

For example, Olmsted took great care to conceive the pathway and circulation system so that even today, vehicles and pedestrians can easily move through the park without interfering with each other; the park's sunken transverse also allowed carriages, and now cars, to cross the park unobtrusively. Pedestrian paths guide people through the park via various destinations, such as the Sailboat Pond, Belvedere Castle, and the Dairy, while vehicles are limited on several park roads during certain hours.

The Mall, a wide, tree-lined promenade, is a formal arcade, designed for stately strolls. In contrast, the heavily wooded Ramble creates a feeling of dense forest and seclusion. Open meadows give one a sense of natural expanse and have accommodated a few of the largest outdoor concerts

in the country, including a Paul Simon concert that drew an estimated 600,000 fans in 1991. The park also plays host to 275 species of birds and sponsors a large group of avid birders.

The other factor that makes Central Park so extraordinary is the innovations of its management entity, the Central Park Conservancy. The Conservancy has developed measurable maintenance standards and guidelines (it is responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the park, among other things); established a zone gardeners programme; and regulated vending in the park. It has also developed a range of activities, events and educational programmes throughout the park, and an extensive volunteer programme.

But a list of Central Park's features and events does little to capture Olmsted and Vaux's inspired achievement. According to Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, who is certainly the park's foremost authority, "He [Olmsted] arranged sequences of visual events to climax in stunning vistas...Though every inch of Central Park was shaped and molded by machines and men, the hand of man is never obvious."

History & Background

The first large city park in the United States draws more than 20 million visits a year, making it one of New York City's most popular attractions. Olmsted and Vaux began designing the Park in 1858, after the city had acquired 778 acres of land, obtained out of a civic need for more open space arising from population growth during the 19th century.

This huge manmade landscape cost US\$14 million to build, and by 1873, the Park had a collection of more than four million trees, shrubs, and plants - a monumental effort, particularly when one considers that New York's largest park at the time was the ten-acre Battery Park. In 1937, the city unveiled the park's 15-acre Great Lawn, built over the original site of the Croton Reservoir.

Numerous ballfields and playgrounds have also been added to the original design. The park contains many institutions and facilities, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, several historic buildings and monuments, an outdoor theatre, a children's zoo, a science centre, a skating rink and four community centres. Occupying a prominent place in the iconography of New York, Central Park is where the New York Marathon ends and where John Lennon is remembered in "Strawberry Fields."

Now encompassing 843 acres, Central Park forms a border for several neighbourhoods in New York, extending from some of the city's wealthiest to some of its poorest. Surrounding the southern portions of the park are primarily high-income, high-rise apartment buildings, with low- to middle- income housing near the northern end in Harlem; a collection of museums along Fifth Avenue forms the park's eastern border.

Kungstradgarden, Stockholm, Sweden

The 400 metres x 100 metres "King's Garden" is variously described as a park, town square, amusement park, and botanical garden.

Why It Works

Located in the heart of the city, Kungstradgarden owes a little to each of its past incarnations, from royal kitchen garden to lush public park to army drill-ground. In 1953, it became the site of Stockholm's 700th birthday festivities, and the central portion has been managed continuously since then as a flexible event and performance space. It has also long been the arena of Swedish premieres. In 1953, the first hot dog was served there, and it was also in the King's Garden that Piccolino introduced espresso and cappuccino to the delight of Swedish palates. In 1962, the first artificially frozen skating-rink was inaugurated in the park, and the first outdoor chess set was put up in the beginning of the 70s.

Kungstradgarden has thrived as a public place primarily because of the ability of its management to accommodate such a wide range of seasonal uses. One of the main elements in the Kungstradgarden is a large tent covering a major stage, where performances take place nearly every day during the warm months. In total, nearly 150 stage events occur there each year, in addition to 100 to 150 days of exhibitions, a Christmas market on December weekends, and a host of other activities. There are also restaurants at the two ends of the garden and rows of trees along both sides. A sunken fountain area with steps is situated in front of one restaurant, and the garden's centre features a large, circular plaza that becomes a skating rink in winter.

Though there are a variety of warm-weather activities, such as chess, checkers and ping pong, for which equipment was available in a small red wooden house, these activities no longer occur to the extent they once did. The garden was redesigned in 1998, and while formerly there was nowhere like it in the world in terms of flexibility, the resulting layout is more rigid and makes many of these activities no longer possible. Also removed in the redesign was a demonstration playground featuring the latest designs for children's play equipment.

In all, however, Kungstradgarden remains a popular, wonderfully airy place in the heart of the city centre. Compared to most places, it still hosts an impressive array of events, activities and performances every season, sponsored by local businesses and organisations.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT Performances take place on the central stage nearly every day during warm months at Kungstradgarden, Stockholm, Sweden; Balboa Park is organised around a system of internal paths leading to its cultural attractions. Many times these paths are filled with activities and festivals, such as the India Festival pictured here; Balboa Park, San Diego, CA, USA (Photos courtesy of Project for Public Spaces).

History & Background

Kungstradgarden was transformed in 1562 from the Royal kitchen garden to a pleasure garden under the direction of French designer Jean Allard. Since then, the park has been modernised several times. At the end of the 18th century, "the common and curious public" gained entrance and the liveliness of the park attained new heights. The Park was modernised several times in accordance with changing fashions. During the 19th century, its lawns, flower borders and various trees were eliminated and the garden was transformed into a drill-ground. Only the alleys of trees were preserved. In order to create festivity grounds for Stockholm's 700th birthday celebrations during the summer of 1953, the King's Garden was once again extensively modified: waste gravel pits became a summer scene with sweets-stalls, open-air cafes and fountains.

Activities are run by Kungstradgarden Park & Evenemang AB (KPE), a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Stockholm Chamber of Commerce. The City appoints representatives to the board. Everything you see and hear is financed by the park itself in a closed economic circuit; no tax money, no national or regional subsidies are included in the financing of the activities. The Stockholm Real Estate, Streets & Traffic Department (GFK) is in charge of the trees, vegetation, cleaning and lighting, while the Recreation Administration operates the skating rink.

Rental income from kiosks, restaurants and tea gardens constitutes the general funds for the financing of the activities in the King's Garden. The stage, equipped with a sound and light outfit, technical staff and a production department, can be hired together with park grounds for large arrangements, campaigns or exhibitions. The generated surplus profits are used for the programmed productions of the park itself and the maintenance of the scene, bunting, chess and vegetation. In this manner, the money stays within the King's Garden to offer entertainment to the visitors.



Balboa Park, San Diego, California, USA

With a host of cultural institutions laid out among its 1,200 lushly planted acres, Balboa Park is known as the "cultural heart" of San Diego.

Why It Works

Laid out around a series of destinations, or "centres of activity," Balboa Park is organised around a system of internal paths leading to its cultural attractions. This makes it clear to people how to use the park and where to go. The major centres of activity are the El Prado area, which houses the majority of museums and theatres, and a hand-painted carousel from 1910. Numerous refreshment stands and eateries - such as Albert's Restaurant in the San Diego Zoo, named after a famous resident, Albert the Gorilla - are also located throughout the park. The House of Hospitality is a visitors centre with maps, event guides and information on park tours.

San Diego's Park and Recreation Department owns and manages both the park and the buildings within it. Buildings are rented to institutions (e.g., museums and theatre companies), which are responsible for programming and interior maintenance. The City provides exterior maintenance of buildings. A number of park advocacy groups also support the park: the Central Balboa Park Association, for instance, is an organisation of the area's museums. Informal entertainment (i.e., juggling, musicians and fortune telling) is managed by the Parks and Recreation Department through a daily permit system.

Cultural and entertainment events take place throughout the year, ranging from weekly concerts on the world's largest outdoor pipe organ to astronomy classes and lectures. The Old Globe Theater and the Spreckels Organ Pavillion host concerts and plays. There are also galleries and gardens, a children's puppet theatre and an OMNIMAX theatre. Despite this wealth of activity, there's still plenty of room for more traditional park activities, like sports and picnicking.

Standing out among the park's attractions is the legendary San Diego Zoo, whose entrance, marked by two 11-foot-tall topiary elephants, is a popular meeting place. The zoo covers 100 acres and is home to 3,800 animals from 800 different species, but it's unique in that it also has a number of creative educational programmes, including sleepover events.

History & Background

The land that is now Balboa Park was set aside by the Board of Trustees of the City of San Diego in May 1868. At first, the site was primarily a nature park used by garden groups, but in 1915, when San Diego entered the competition to host the Panama-California Exposition, the cultural aspect of the park began to evolve. Its buildings now house a variety of museums, including the Museum of Man, the Museum of Art, the Aerospace Museum, and the Automotive Museum.

The Zoo was founded in 1916 by Dr. Harry Wegeforth, and when San Diego hosted the California Pacific Exposition in 1935, new buildings were constructed that reflect Pueblo and Mayan architectural styles. Several buildings, including the Casa de Balboa, were influenced by Spanish Colonial architecture. The Ford Building, an impressive Art Nouveau structure, was also built at this time.

During World Wars I and II, barracks and military headquarters were temporarily located in the park; after 1946, much of the damage done during those years was repaired. In 1960, a master plan for Balboa Park was created to continue the growth and development of the park. A new plan was adopted in 1989 to carry out park improvements over the next 20 years - including the renovation of several popular structures from the 1915 exposition.



Hong Kong Park, Hong Kong

Providing a variety of cultural, recreational and educational programmes and facilities, Hong Kong Park is known for its flowing water, including waterfalls, streams, and ponds that provide a thematic connection between the various features of the park.

Why It Works

Hong Kong Park is an urban public park close to the central business district in Hong Kong, offering reprieve from the bustling downtown and providing numerous attractions and destinations that draw both tourists and locals alike. Activities in the park are free to the public and attract over a million visitors a year. It is managed by Hong Kong's Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) and has its Park Management Office on site in the Rawlinson House, a colonial building dating back to the early 1900s. Also in the Rawlinson House is the Cotton Tree Drive Marriage Registry, making the park a great backdrop for wedding photos.

There are many different attractions and smaller destinations within the Park, including: the largest aviary in Hong Kong; a greenhouse that has temporary plant exhibitions, such as the "Orchid Exhibition"; an artificial lake; Tai Chi gardens; a children's playground; and a sports complex. Olympic Square seats 880 people and is the site for concerts, plays, sports, as well as other entertainment activities and events. The park also has a variety of restaurants, cafes, and kiosks for visitors.

The park is easily accessible by public transportation as well as by foot. The Park is only a short walk through the shopping centre Pacific Place, where a two-floor escalator leads to just outside the park. While cars are not allowed in the park itself, there are a number of public garages nearby.

The park derives its image and identity from the theme of flowing water and its colonial history that blend historic and modern architecture into the natural landscape. The park has several activities and programmes for children, making the park a great place for families to participate in education or watch turtles swim through the river that flows through the park.

History & Background

Until 1979, the park was the site of the British Victoria Barracks and many colonial buildings are left over from this military time. The most impressive building is the Flagstaff House built in 1846, which once housed the Commander of the British Forces in Hong Kong. The building now houses the Hong Kong Tea Ware Museum that exhibits a fine collection of antiques.

The idea to transform the military barracks into a 20-acre-big park came about in 1979, but its grand opening was not until 1991. The park was a joint venture between the former Urban Council and the former Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club and cost HK\$398 million to build. The Jockey Club contributed HK\$170 million to the park development and managed the project on behalf of the Council.

BELOW, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM Both locals and tourists alike enjoy Hong Kong Park's various cultural, recreational and educational activities (Photo: Projects for Public Spaces); A waterfall provides a dramatic focal point for Paley Park, New York, NY, USA.(Photo: jskrybe, Flickr Creative Commons); Movable seating and tables allows users to control the way they use the space; Paley Park, New York, NY, USA (Photo: Projects for Public Spaces)



Paley Park, New York, NY, USA

Located within Midtown's cultural district and surrounded by high-rises, this celebrated "vest-pocket" park is a welcome respite from the sights and sounds of urban living.

Why It Works


A small vest pocket park, in midtown Manhattan, the park was developed (and every detail considered) by the person who paid for it, William Paley, former Chairman of CBS. Mr. Paley was involved in all aspects of planning the park from its conception to the selection of the right hot dog (which is still served at a reasonable price). Featured in William H. Whyte's film, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, the park is a success for several reasons.

For one, it is located directly on the street so that people are attracted to look in and enter. It has good, reasonably priced food, as well as movable chairs and tables that let people be comfortable and have some control over where they sit. A waterfall provides a dramatic focal point and a reason to enter the park; its noise blocks out the sounds of the city and creates a sense of quiet and privacy. There's adequate shade in the summer from the trees, though they allow a beautiful dappled light to pass through their leaves.

People that PPS interviewed in the park said that they liked it because they could be "alone" in a busy city and it gave them a quiet, restful feeling. In reality, Paley Park is a quite heavily used place, but the movable chairs allow people the freedom to sit where they choose. It is also very noisy, but the noise is white noise from the waterfall.

History & Background

Completed in 1967, Paley Park is celebrated as one of the smallest managed urban parks, and a prime example of a successful privately owned public space. The design for this 4,200-squarefoot space, created by Zion and Breene Associates for the William S. Paley Foundation, proves that even a small space can serve as both a popular meeting ground and a place for relaxation and calm. Slightly elevated from street level, the sidewalk blends with the park allowing for easy access from passers-by. The park's 20-foot cascading waterfall, running at 1800 gallons per minute, creates a backdrop of sound that causes the city noise to fade away.

The walls are covered with dense, green ivy and 17 honey locust trees provide a thin overhead canopy. The park's wire mesh chairs and tables help to make it a popular luncheon spot. Paley Park has an intimate relation with the street. Low and inviting steps and trees that canopy the sidewalk often influence passerby to stroll through the park on impulse. 

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