

Form, Funding and Political Purposes of Urban Parks

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Abstract

This paper examines the political motivations behind the establishment of public urban parks in western Europe and the United States, and addresses issues affecting the funding of those parks. It does this through a chronological examination of park development, arguing that the physical form and facilities provided in parks reflect the purposes for which they were designated. As such, the form and purpose of parks therefore reflect, in their various forms and functions, the intentions and values of their funding agencies. The paper examines principal sources of funding for public parks, and documents current challenges in funding urban parks with public money.

Keywords

urban parks, political purposes, park funding, Western Europe, United States

Introduction

Parks have evolved from being paternalistically-conceived pastoral antidotes to infernal industrial settlements to being recreation components of the City Beautiful and then components of the 'city functional', and on to currently being seen as providing economic and green infrastructure services. This transition has included contributions to human physical and psychological health, to fitness through active recreation, to raising the value of neighbouring real estate, to the structuring of urban form, to the restoration of derelict land, and to city marketing. Latterly, as climate change has become a more politically-charged topic, the role of urban parks in providing 'ecological services' has become more important. At the same time, single-purpose parks have been created, particularly for play – like Maggie Daley Park in Chicago and an extension to Parc André-Citroën in Paris. The projects referred to in this paper are generally larger parks and park systems. They are listed chronologically in Table 1 (below). Between them, they demonstrate a range of purposes for parks and a range of funding models for them.

PARK	LOCATION	DATE OF CURRENT DESIGN
Englischer Garten	Munich, Germany	1789
Royal Parks	London, England	1820s
Tiergarten	Berlin, Germany	1833
Derby Arboretum	Derby, England	1840
Birkenhead Park	Merseyside, England	1845
Central Park	New York, USA	1858
Hausmann + Alphand's Parks	Paris, France	1850s and 1860s
Prospect Park, Brooklyn	New York, USA	1866
Forest Park, St Louis	Missouri, USA	1876
Minneapolis Park System	Minnesota, USA	1883
Kansas City Parks and Boulevards	Missouri, USA	1893
Hamburg Stadtpark	Hamburg, Germany	1910
Grant Park	Chicago, USA	1915
Amsterdamse Bos	Amsterdam, The Netherlands	1935
Paley Park	New York, USA	1967
Parc de la Villette	Paris, France	1983
Parc André-Citroën	Paris, France	1987
Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord	Duisburg, Germany	1992
Westergasfabriek	Amsterdam, The Netherlands	1998
Millennium Park	Chicago, USA	2004
The High Line	New York, USA	2004
Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park	London, England	2009

TABLE 1 Chronology of Parks Addressed in Paper

Galen Cranz's *The Politics of Park Design* (1982) reviewed motivations for the funding and design of public parks in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. Cranz examined the archived minutes of the respective city committees responsible for parks in order to evince their motivations for investing public money in urban parks. In that process, she identified four eras of park development – the Pleasure Ground (1850-1900), the Reform Park (1900-30), the Recreation Facility (1930-65), and the Open-Space System (from 1965). Latterly, with her student Michael Boland, Cranz identified, from a global study of recent park projects, the emergence (from 1990) of what they termed the Sustainable Park era.

Cranz's eras can, of course, be questioned. Geographer Terence Young, in his study of parks in San Francisco, concluded that there were only two eras of park development – the romantic era up to the 1920s, after which 'urban parks were no longer *the* promoters of moral order' and 'changed little', and the rationalistic era whose 'vision continues to dominate' (Young, 2004, p. 13). So, essentially, Young identified eras of romantic paternalism and pragmatic functionalism.

My suggested chronology – based on an examination of parks across western Europe and North America (as opposed to the relatively small number of cities studied by Cranz and by Young) comprises:

- the industrial city before 1940, comprising two parts – first, a pastoral / romantic era providing parks for passive recreation in contrast to the infernal industrial city, and second, the post-Nietzschean, Modernist era up until World War II, typified by axial, neo-Baroque parks, such as the Hamburg Stadtpark and other Volksparks, which were designed primarily for active recreation
- from World War II to 1980, an era of rapid suburbanisation, and de-centred expansion of cities during which parks were often underfunded and allowed to deteriorate
- the post-industrial era, after about 1980 – with 'white flight' reversed and lower income groups being pushed to the edges of cities. This coincides with establishment of public-private partnerships for the restoration of ageing pastoral parks in the United States – like Central and Prospect Parks in New York, and Forest Park in St Louis – and the creation of new parks like Parc de la Villette in Paris, the Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, the Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam, and Olympic Park in London – all active recreational venues on former industrial land and all with significant national government funding.

Park Purposes

No matter how one defines eras of park development, there is a clear sequence of urban parks being designed as, first, a response to living conditions in industrial cities; then as places for the development of physical fitness; next as run-down places for people left behind by post World War II suburbanisation; and latterly as resources that have been restored and revived by and for citizens returning to living more centrally. This pattern of changes has been supported by funds from a diverse range of sources.



FIGURE 1 The Englischer Garten, Munich, Germany. Converted for public use in 1789 (Photograph by Alan Tate, October 2014).



FIGURE 2 Derby Arboretum, England. Donated by industrialist Joseph Strutt, opened in 1840 (Photograph by Alan Tate, August 2013).

Nineteenth-century parks in Europe included existing royal and military sites like the Royal Parks in London, the Bois de Boulogne and the Bois de Vincennes in Paris, the Tiergarten in Berlin, and the Englischer Garten in Munich (Fig. 1). These were donated to citizens (or made available – the Royal Parks in London remain in Crown ownership) and redesigned with national government funds for public use – to avert political unrest as much as to provide sanitary ‘lungs’ in the city. It is worth noting, for instance, that, in 1789 – the year of the French Revolution, the military land now occupied by the Englischer Garten was allocated by Archduke Charles Theodore (1724-99), first for crop gardens for soldiers and then as a public park.

The conversion of royal parkland into public parks by monarchs and their governments was followed by examples of private philanthropy and then by public funding of parks. Private philanthropy is exemplified by Derby Arboretum (1840) – a donation from industrialist Joseph Strutt (Fig. 2), and Birkenhead Park (1845) was the first publicly-funded urban park in the world (Fig. 3). Both projects demonstrated concern for the health of urban dwellers in an era of intensive industrialisation. And in Paris the earthworks and sinuously-curving path system in Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (Fig. 4) are testimony to Haussmann and Alphands’ preoccupation with ideas of health and circulation, in its many forms (Komara, 2009).



FIGURE 3 Birkenhead Park, England. Reputedly the first publicly funded park in the world, opened in 1847 and fully refurbished with National Lottery funds in 2004-08 (Photograph by Marcella Eaton, July 2013).

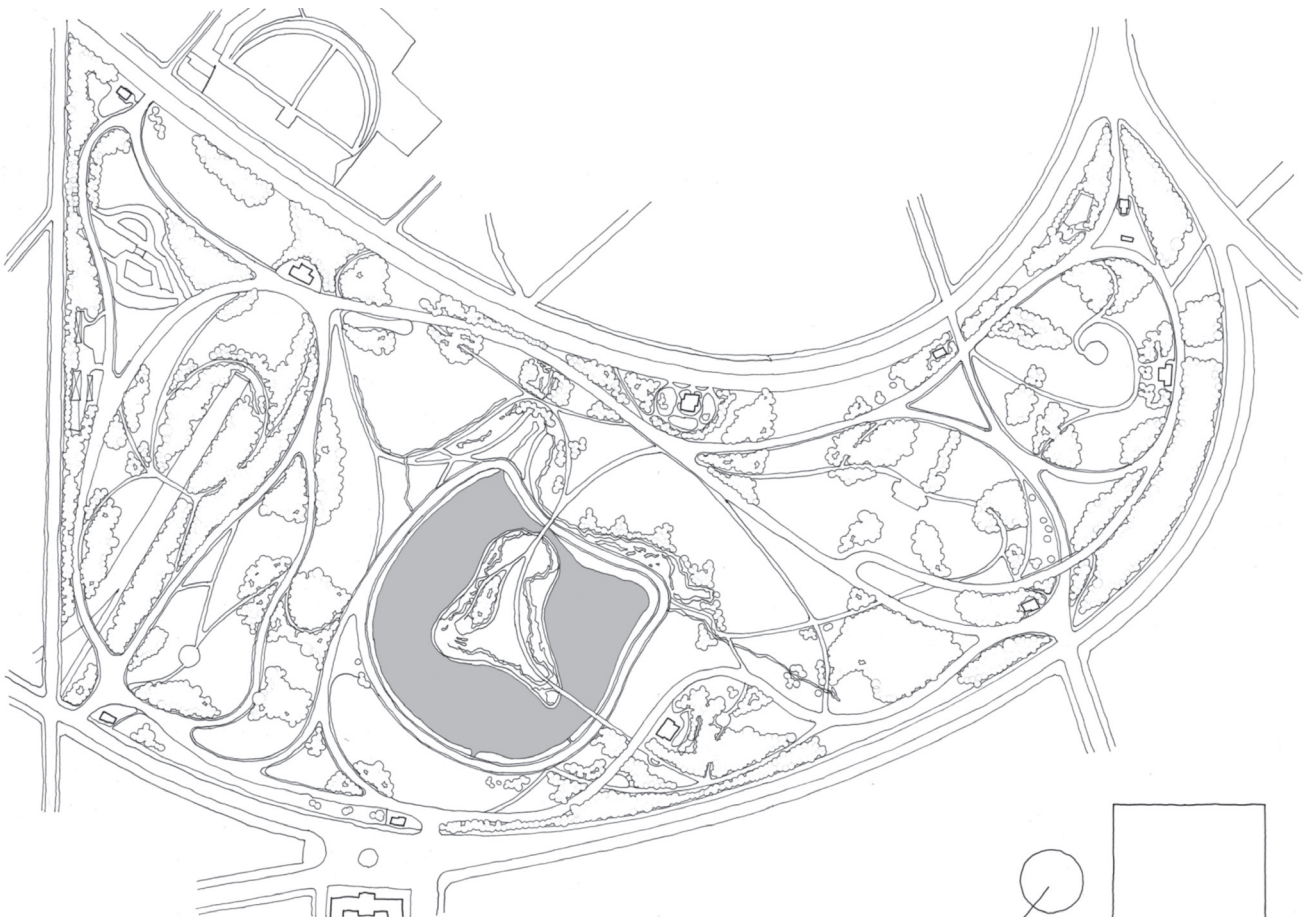


FIGURE 4 Plan of Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, Paris showing sinuous circulation system (Drawing by Peter Siry).

In the United States, there was a strong commercial motivation of 'city-marketing' manifest in parks across the country, starting with the state-funded Central Park, New York – where the call for a major public park probably originated from Robert Browne Minturn (1836-89), a merchant who had travelled widely in Europe. In fact, the development of parks and boulevards in many cities in the United States – including Chicago, Minneapolis, and Kansas City – was driven by a combination of civic pride, response to traumatic events (particularly Chicago's 'Great Fire' of 1871), and city-marketing. All of them were influenced by the example of 'Haussmann's Paris', not least because many American architects received their design education at the *École-des-Beaux-Arts*.

As an example, the commercially-funded *Plan of Chicago* (1906) – the apotheosis of the City Beautiful – asked 'after it is finished will the people of means be so ready to run away and spend their money in other cities?' Similarly, Augustus Robert Meyer – President of the Kansas City Municipal Improvement Association – together with Frankhausen-born landscape architect George Edward Kessler and William Nelson, founder and editor of the *Kansas City Star*, saw parks as a vehicle for marketing the city (Mobley & Harris, 1991). These developments were largely funded by the individual cities, sometimes through dedicated parks board taxes of the type still levied in Chicago and Minneapolis. They were early precursors of the 'Bilbao Effect' and can be fairly compared with *Structural Vision: Amsterdam 2040* adopted in 2011, promoting that city's public realm as an attraction to footloose, technology-based industries (rather than tourists) to relocate to that city.

The early twentieth-century *Volkspark* in Germany paralleled the Reform Park in the United States and carried similar moral messages about recreation and health. Schumaker's Hamburg Stadtpark (Fig. 5) was the archetypal Volkspark. The subsequent format (or formula) for the Volkspark comprised 'three distinct elements – a stretch of water, an island of grass and a shady screen of trees' (de Michelis, 1991, p. 409). Similarly, as Cranz put it, 'utility, not beauty, was the goal of the Reform Park' (Cranz, 1982). The *Volkspark* was a precedent for the *Jugendpark* (Youth Park) promoted by Leberecht Migge (1881-1935) and others during the Weimar Republic (1918-33) – described as an approach in which 'function now began to create form, instead of being accommodated within a form that was preconceived' (Chadwick, 1966, p.254).



FIGURE 5 Stadtpark, Hamburg, showing one of present-day play areas (Photograph by Alan Tate, August 2013).

Concurrently, Britain's *Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration* (1904) promoted the establishment of municipal parks with extensive sports fields. And the work of Thomas Mawson (1861-1933) – author of what he called the 'composite style' – reflected the fact that a park had become 'a landscape arising from certain use requirements, to which "style" is afterwards applied' (Chadwick, 1966, p.223). The modernist idea of the recreation facility as a programmed space for physical exercise persisted until World War II. And, in the case of, for example, the plans drawn up in 1941 for extension of the Hamburg Stadtpark on an axis to the northeast, this idea continued into the war (City of Hamburg, 1997).

Federal funds from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal supported refurbishment of existing parks and provision of new parks as essentially practical facilities. The 1934 re-design of New York's Bryant Park by Lusby Simpson and Gilmore Clark – which introduced the Great Lawn (Fig. 6) and promenades of *Platanus acerifolia* – was the result of a competition for out-of-work architects and led to the creation of 'no less than America's finest classically designed park' (Lynn & Morrone, 2013, p.236). The same type of make-work approach was adopted in the creation of the labour-intensive Amsterdamse Bos, commenced in 1934 (RIBA, 1934). However, by 1960, burgeoning car-based suburban development, particularly in the United States, led to underfunding and a downward spiral of neglect, declining visitor numbers, increasing vandalism, perceived (if not actual) high crime levels, and a growing backlog of deferred maintenance.

This decline included New York's two headline parks – Central and Prospect – and continued until the formation in 1980 of the Central Park Conservancy and Prospect Park Alliance, partnerships for their protection and improvement. This was the first major move in hybrid, public-private funding for urban parks. By 2013, the Conservancy had received donations of over \$700 million and provided 85% of the annual budget for the park. This pattern of funding is more extreme in the United States – particularly in New York, which has a highly developed culture of philanthropy – and in Chicago where the \$470 million Millennium Park (Fig. 7) was supported by \$200 million in private donations – leading to legitimate concerns about privatisation of the public realm. The City of St Louis and, in particular, the non-profit friends group *Forest Park Forever*, have also been remarkably successful in raising funds to protect, improve and manage their 555-hectare principal public park. The target for their most recent fund-raising campaign (from 2013 to 2018) was \$130 million – \$30 million for capital works and \$100 million for endowments.

Despite these changes in the funding and fortunes of many parks in the United States, in his inaugural presidential address, Donald Trump included the statement that 'communities have fallen into disrepair with rampant crime and rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now'. Robust rhetoric ... but not altogether accurate. In New York, for example, where more than 2,000 people used to be murdered each year, 328 were killed in 2014, the lowest number since the 1940s. As Adam Gopnik put it, 'from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon, the transformation of America's inner cities from wastelands to self-conscious espresso zones became the comedy of our time' (Gopnik, 2018, p.92). The falling crime rate can be attributed to multiple causes – broken-windows surveillance, more coercive policing, and the rising median age of having a first child, enabling singles to stay longer in the centre of cities. This era of young singles living in New York was characterised by TV shows like *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Sex and the City*.

Meanwhile European examples include the Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam, run by a private company under a model of 'cultural entrepreneurship', and London's Royal Parks, which now generate around 50% of their annual budget from summer rock concerts and winter festivals. But for the last twenty years in Britain, the Heritage Lottery Fund was the only major source of funds for restoration of (primarily historic) urban parks, providing in the order of £700 million for their restoration. This reflects the fact that, in most western countries, parks are a non-statutory local authority service that has to compete for funds with health and social services. And, with ageing populations making increasing demands on statutory services, local authority finances are undergoing increasing pressure.



FIGURE 6 Millennium Park, Chicago. Jointly funded by City of Chicago and private donors at a cost of around \$470 million, opened in 2004 (Photograph by Alan Tate, October 2013).

While parks like the entirely privately-funded Paley Park (completed in 1967) – a standout project that signalled a flickering return of faith in the liveability of American cities (Fig. 8), and the High Line – commenced in 2004 – whose maintenance is 90% privately-funded, are extreme examples, they represent a recurrent pattern of politicians outsourcing the funding of nominally public facilities and, very possibly, decreasing their democratic qualities. Although private funding can promote public engagement with parks, there is also the risk of park managers feeling obliged to cater to the tastes of major funders. There is, for instance, a strong sense of corporate presence in Millennium Park, Chicago, where the \$200 million from private donors paid for above-ground features like the AT&T Plaza, the Pritzker Pavilion, and the BP Bridge.

Then there are stories like the ‘Sheffield Street Tree Massacre’, in reputedly the ‘greenest’ city in Europe. Outsourcing under a 25-year Private Finance Initiative (PFI) has enabled a multi-national company to profit from the removal of mature street trees that it deems to be ‘damaging’ to roads and sidewalks (Sheffield Tree Action Group). Meanwhile, city-marketing (in pursuit of the ‘Bilbao effect’) leads to public investment in high-profile projects (like the Parc de la Villette in the 1980s and most Olympic Games since World War II) while the ‘Graph of Doom’ (showing an increasingly aged population being supported on finite local government budgets) leads to the deterioration of public parks, particularly in poorer areas. It also leads to parks becoming a political issue, as illustrated by the OURS (Outdoor Urban Recreation Spaces) campaign in Winnipeg, Canada. That campaign, commenced in 2011, seeks to make provision and management of public space a focal issue in municipal elections in order to leverage funding for them.

The impact of reduced public funding for parks and public spaces is exacerbated by the fact that cuts in park budgets manifest themselves relatively slowly and do not have immediate political repercussions. But there are optimistic signs of a possible approach to these issues with the example of Newcastle-upon-Tyne establishing, in November 2017, with guidance from the National Trust, a charitable trust to manage their parks. This does have to be viewed, however, in the perspective of the city’s parks budget having been cut by 90% over the preceding seven years (City of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2018). This kind of financial structure negates the long-term need to see parks as an integral part of cities and to see cities as an integral part of wider natural systems – as cultural capital rather than window-dressing for commercial facilities.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the principal motivations for funding the development of public parks generally have a political dimension. Inevitably, the form that they have taken has reflected these considerations. The paper also illustrates the difficulty of maintaining parks through public funds alone in the twenty-first century.

The principal political purposes for the creation of public parks have been:

- reducing civil unrest (e.g. Englischer Garten in Munich, Haussmann and Alphands’ parks in Paris)
- as part of city-marketing (e.g. Central Park in New York, Plan of Chicago, Kansas City parks and boulevards and, latterly, Structural Vision: Amsterdam)
- general recreation and health of people in industrial cities, and preparing young men for war (e.g. municipal parks in Britain in the wake of concern about ‘physical deterioration’ of urban males)
- creating work at times of depression (e.g. Bryant Park, New York and Amsterdamse Bos)
- making beneficial use of post-industrial sites that might otherwise remain dangerously contaminated (e.g. Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord and Westergasfabriek).



FIGURE 7 Paley Park, New York. Privately-funded public park, opened in 1967 and completely refurbished to the same design in 1999 (Photograph by Marcella Eaton, November 2011)

It is clearly becoming more challenging to support parks in North America and western Europe from public funds alone, particularly in countries that have ageing populations that also have to be supported from public funds. Increased dependence on private funding of parks becomes inevitable and, with it, increased responsiveness to donor interests, whether they are entrepreneurs like rock concert promoters or local property owners who recognise the symbiosis between parks and property values, often co-opting parks as instruments of gentrification, thereby driving out the very people for whom the parks were intended.

Furthermore, with their substantial biotic component, parks require regular, recurrent attention in order to maintain their health – as do humans. Latterly, human health providers have developed greater appreciation of the physical and psychological benefits of time spent in local green space. And that remains a major argument for the future funding of urban parks – so that they may continue to be adequately funded and are thus able to maintain their design integrity while being places that allow people to escape their daily routines without leaving town.

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