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## Good Places

*A closer look at the four cornerstones of a good place: uses & activities, access & linkage, comfort & image - and perhaps most important - sociability. From Park Talk, the newsletter of the Urban Parks Institute.*






Recently there is increasing talk about the importance of rediscovering a sense of community that we somehow lost when we gave up time-honored habits and stopped frequenting the vital meeting places, the "good places," in our neighborhoods. From downtown management organizations to city commissions to transportation agencies, people are discovering that unique places once integral to people's everyday lives are slowly but surely disappearing. Parks are no exception. Through our research at the Urban Parks Institute, we are learning that many parks no longer function as important places that capture the hearts of local residents.



It was not always like this. Both landscape historian J.B. Jackson and architect/writer Galen Cranz write about the history and changing role of parks in people's everyday lives. They describe a time when city residents, on their days off, left their "noisy, dirty

day-to-day world in search of nature, "but it was nature both connected to a recreational destination and with social activities. For example in Europe, many city-dwellers headed out for country walks on their day off to the 'volksgarten' (literally, "people's garden") which was a path lined with boisterous entertainment, including merry-go-rounds, dance music, and refreshment booths, leading to a larger recreational destination at the end. Artists of that period, like Impressionist painter Georges Seurat, showed people swimming while others walked along the promenade on the Grand Jatte, an island outside Paris -- illustrating the popular intermingling of social activity with recreation.

In the United States, the promenades of seaside resorts and beaches such as Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York and Hoboken, New Jersey 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. According to Cranz, park officials discouraged loud activities in favor of

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leisurely strolls and appreciation of the beauties of nature in order to elevate people of 'lower classes' to imitate the behavior of their fellow 'middle class' park users.

Unfortunately, many of these same parks -- and their descendants -- are not well used today. In addition to the obvious lack of maintenance and funding, parks often lack the right combination of physical amenities and activities that make the park a magnet and an important place within a particular community. In his book *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, J.B. Jackson describes the loss of community in America and its impact on parks. As people spend more and more time at work, at indoor health spas, and at malls, he writes, they also share less time and fewer activities with their fellow residents and neighbors -- resulting in the loss of a sense of community. 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.

How can today's parks once again become important places in communities? Can -- or should -- the vitality of parks of the past be revived? We know that parks can provide serenity, calm vistas and an experience of nature, but shouldn't they also provide places for social activities? New York's Central Park and San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, both examples of the 19th century picturesque park, have evolved into very actively used parks and continue to attract people today. Last year alone, these two parks hosted roughly 30 million visitors who participated in a variety of activities ranging from jogging on trails, to bird-watching, to eating lunch and having a cup of coffee, to just doing nothing. Parks such as these have by no means stopped offering opportunities to contemplate natural beauty, but passive uses are balanced with areas that buzz with social activity.

To help other communities have similar successes attracting people, Project for Public Spaces has researched what attributes most social places share. We found that a good place provides a range of things to do ("uses and activities"); is easy to get to and connected to the surrounding community ("access"); is safe, clean, and attractive ("comfort and image"); and, perhaps, most important, is a place to meet other people ("sociability"). This model also provides a useful framework both for describing existing research and writing and for evaluating parks as places.

### **Activities and Uses**

What types of activities make parks community magnets? 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, attracting many different people. 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 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 in a park, a corner bar, a coffeehouse or a playground -- all are places characterized by popular informality. Their users

can anticipate lively conversations with the 'regulars,' 'characters,' and other neighbors. According to 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.

### **Comfort and Image**

Good details can tantalize -- they signal that someone took the time and energy to design amenities that welcome, intrigue, or help. *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village* by planner/developer David Sucher and *People Places: Design Guidelines for Urban Open Spaces*, edited by Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis, are packed with thoughtful design ideas including community bulletin boards, restrooms, shade trees, child-friendly niches and bike racks. Author and urbanologist William Whyte talks about the importance of movable seating in his book, *City: Rediscovering the Center*. Today two thousand movable chairs are scattered on the lawn of Bryant Park in New York, transforming the park from a drug infested public space to a popular mid-town haven.

### **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' book, *The Experience of Place* 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" -- if your visual signals are blocked you won't proceed.

### **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. Have you ever noticed how many enjoyable conversations you can have at a farmers' market or a flea market? Psychologist Robert Sommer's research says that people tend to have four and a half times more sociable talks with people in a market versus a supermarket. How can the builders and managers of today's parks learn more from other places such as markets about where and how social activity occurs?

### **In Conclusion**

A good place is refreshing and rejuvenating; after you leave it, you feel better for having been there. Sometimes you can't miss a good place when you stumble upon it - for it has great beauty to beguile and recharge you; or you don't miss it because it possesses the siren call of thoughtful design touches that say someone wanted you to feel welcome there. At other times, a good place works well

not because of an aesthetic appeal but because it is neighborly - it draws people in and enables them to relax companionably. It might not look like much, but it knits its residents together as they wile away time together and it is seen as the place to be!

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