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Urban Parks: Innovate Or Stagnate

If the majority of America's parks aren't going to stagnate, they're going to need to learn from those parks that are getting it right.

By Fred Kent
Apr 14, 2003



Massive budget cuts in U.S. cities, combined with a growing focus on urban revitalization and walkable cities, puts urban parks in the spotlight as never before. Effectiveness is the name of the game, and however you look at it, there's no doubt that the most effective parks are the ones that are best used.

But it's not just a matter of attracting lots of people; it's a matter of having a diversity of people, who are attracted by a range of things to do, throughout the year.

Which is why it is so remarkable that, although people profess to love parks, many parks are failing to attract people. Take a look for yourself in towns and cities across the country, and you'll see parks and plazas galore that have little happening in them at all.

The problem is that there's an art to successful park design and management -- an art that we seem to be losing. Basic elements -- such as comfort, sociability, access and activities -- seem to have slipped through the cracks as more and more parks fail to meet the mixed and varied needs of their visitors.

Even high-profile parks are showing signs of being in trouble. New York's Bryant Park -- famed for a renovation that brought

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By *Wally Siembab*

Aug 31, 2005

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[The Sky Is Not Falling On Cities](#)

By *Carol Coletta*

crowds to a once-derelict hangout for drug dealers - is one example. While its lush lawns and convenient moveable chairs make it a heavily used place for much of the year, it is increasingly given over to private interests. At the main park entrance, Starbucks has taken the place of local coffee purveyors. And the park is virtually inaccessible to regular folk for up to a month each year, due to the semi-annual Mercedes-Benz New York Fashion Week (including set up and recovery). Despite its innovative history, Bryant Park has become a victim of its own success and is cutting itself off from the public it ought to be serving.



New York's [Bryant Park](#) is becoming ever more privatized.



Bryant Park as it should be.

While Bryant Park suffers as a result of corporatization, Denver's Skyline Park has been condemned because of over-design and then abandonment. Described by *Rocky Mountain News* editor and publisher, John Temple as a "bold vision, but flawed", the 3.2-acre park was completed in 1973 with the aim of renewing a blighted area of the city. The problem is that the sole path through the park goes nowhere, offering only concrete walls and ledges for comfort. Overflowing garbage cans, cigarette butts and chipped wooden benches are a clear sign of a park that got left behind. (It's now slated for a controversial redesign.)

Granted, most parks are not at the epicenter of Midtown Manhattan, nor are they as dramatically neglected as Skyline Park. But it's not just the high-profile places that are at risk. Nibbled away for parking lots and office blocks, hijacked by single-issue recreational groups from dog owners to Little Leaguers, over-designed by the very people trying to save them - America's everyday parks are also facing challenges.

So which ones are getting it right? They are the ones that have dedicated people who are willing to think creatively, innovate and listen to their range of users.

It's always inspiring to look outside the U.S for examples, such as the Paris Plage, a smash hit last summer. With a

Aug 25, 2005

Cities aren't in decline. The way population change is "measured" by the Census Bureau leaves much to be desired, writes Carol Coletta in this week's Op-Ed. But even if cities were in decline, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success. What is ironic about these estimates and the misleading story of decline that has been spun around them is the fact that cities no longer have to grow big to grow wealthy. For the first time, according to research from CEOs for Cities, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success.

[From NIMBYs To DUDEs: The Wacky World Of Plannerese](#)

By *Ric Stephens*

Jul 26, 2005

Ric Stephens has compiled a list of some of the wackiest -- yet at times quite realistic -- urban planning words, in a vocabulary he has dubbed 'Plannerese.' This week's Planetizen Op-Ed includes a selected glossary of the terms, in addition to 'A Modern Fairy Tale in Plannerese,' which looks at a typical planning issue through the humorous lens of planning jargon.

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ribbon of sand, umbrellas, cafes and volleyball courts, Mayor Bertrand Delanoë temporarily transformed 3.8 kilometers of inner-city expressway along the Seine River into an urban beach (displacing hundreds of thousands of motorists in the process). Seventeen city agencies worked together to create this temporary park, equipped with 80 imported palm trees, 22 changing tents, 150 parasols and 300 blue canvas deckchairs.

Besides all these accoutrements, there was plenty to do at Paris-Plage: a string of cafes, music and dance floors, climbing walls, volleyball, boules, and putting greens. Despite taking place during the dog-days of summer, when Paris empties... Three million people visited the Paris-Plage in its first week, 600,000 on the first day alone.



The Christmas market at [Vienna's Rathaus/City Hall Park](#).

Vienna's Rathaus/City Hall Park is another good example. Surrounded by some of the city's most treasured buildings, the park is one of the city's most popular destinations for locals and tourists alike. It is used all year round for concerts, festivals, markets and even small-scale tennis tournaments. But the biggest draws are the Christmas markets, the ice rink in January, and the "classical music film festival" in summer.

Back in North America, Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square is another example of a park that has won the support of its public. Rather than opting for a passive green space, the Square is indeed a "pioneer" among a new generation of public spaces designed for a flexible range of uses and activities. It has a continuing tradition of citizen participation with thousands of community events held over the past decade, and ongoing experimentation with new seasonal uses.

On the other hand, Dufferin Grove Park in Toronto, Canada, provides plenty of green space, but is far from passive in its uses. Described as a "community center without a roof," the park

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rejected the stereotypical children's playground and opted instead for the kind of "equipment" that universally appeals to kids: water, sand, crafts and even old pots and pans. For older people, there's a community oven for baking pizza and bread, a theatre, ice rink, wading pool, baseball diamond, basketball court, chess, checkers, card playing ... all within a setting of beautiful and abundant old shady trees.



[Dufferin Grove Park](#) in Toronto, Canada, is a green space that's far from passive in its uses.

Great parks are the key to more livable towns and cities. The tragedy is that if they aren't well-designed and managed, then they aren't properly used -- and if they aren't used, then... they simply go away or cease to become public spaces.

So if the majority of America's parks aren't going to stagnate, they're going to need to learn a thing or two from those parks that are getting it right -- and get back to creating parks that are attractive and accessible to everyone who wishes to use them.

[Fred Kent](#) is President of [Project for Public Spaces](#). Project for Public Spaces, along with Central Park Conservancy, are hosting [Great Parks/Great Cities: Celebrating 150 years of Central Park 8th International Urban Parks Conference](#), on June 21-25, 2003 in New York City.

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