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# **Imagining social justice and the false promise of urban park design**

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## **Abstract**

Urban park designers have long championed the social underpinnings of their work. Of late, however, certain landscape practitioners have articulated a more explicit connection between park design and social objectives, arguing that the fundamental role of urban parks is to foster equity and justice. Drawing on Marxian geographer David Harvey's notion of the geographical imagination, this paper interrogates the relationship between parks and social processes by exploring the role that social issues have historically played in urban park design and by unpacking the prevailing imaginaries of social justice landscape architects and designers have employed in contemporary urban park projects. In doing so it juxtaposes the lofty rhetoric of designing for social justice against the material reality of development-driven urban regeneration. In this way, the geographic imaginary provides a framework for understanding the limited capacity of urban park design to address broader social issues, even as it offers a mechanism for conceiving and articulating alternatives that more completely address the conditions through which social injustice occurs.

Urban park designers in the United States have long championed the social purpose or underpinnings of their work. Among the earliest was Frederick Law Olmsted, whose 1858 "greensward" plan conceived of New York City's Central Park as a democratic space where "the cultivated and the self-made could assimilate," an urban oasis that would "lift up the poor" (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992: 18)<sup>1</sup> and "give the mind a suggestion of rest from the devouring eagerness and intellectual strife of town life" (Olmsted, 1908: 66). Even though Central Park never fully lived up to Olmsted's lofty ideals, the premise that space could be

sculpted to shape human behavior and interaction soon became a central and recurring theme in American urban park design. Whether through the works of Robert Moses, whose swimming pools and playgrounds were built to promote physical fitness and productive citizenship by providing the (albeit predominantly white) working class with facilities previously reserved for the wealthy (Gutman, 2007) or the urban parks and plazas designed by Lawrence Halprin to be “places for everyone” and reflect an “innate sense of ‘rightness’” (Hirsch, 2005: 80)<sup>2</sup> the field of American landscape architecture is dotted with parks designed to nurture specific social ideals.

More recently, however, a number of designers have suggested an even more explicit and potentially profound connection between park design and social objectives. In the 1995 master plan for the re-design of Houston’s historic Hermann Park, the landscape architect Laurie Olin, who was deeply influenced by Halprin, wrote of a “vision” for the park that would be “driven by a desire for equity and justice” (Hanna/Olin, 1995: 48). Indeed, he argued, fostering those values is the core purpose, the fundamental “role of the urban park,” (1995: 5).

Just over a decade later, James Corner (2006: 28), the lead designer of The High Line, New York City’s much-celebrated elevated railway-turned-linear park/promenade, published an essay in which he called on landscape practitioners to work within “more socially just, politically emancipatory, ecologically sane mix(es) of spatio-temporal production processes...” Citing the Marxian geographer David Harvey, Corner invoked the idea of the geographic imaginary in arguing for a more visionary and activist landscape urbanism practice. “The collective imagination,” Corner (2006: 32) wrote:

“informed and stimulated by the experiences of the material world, must continue to be the primary motivation of any critical endeavor. In many ways, the failing of twentieth-century planning can be attributed to the absolute impoverishment of the imagination with regard to the

optimized rationalization of development practices and capital accumulation."

Yet by acknowledging the failure of planning and by drawing on Harvey, who originally theorized the geographic imaginary as a spatial counterpoint to C. Wright Mill's concept of the sociological imagination<sup>3</sup>, Corner casts into question the very idea that transformations of the physical environment can bring about social justice. In Harvey's (1973) view, the geographic imaginary enables people to understand the critical link between space and the social relationships that form their everyday lives. It also allows them to "fashion and use space creatively," as well as to make meaning of the spatial forms created by others. But in his groundbreaking work, *Social Justice and the City* and subsequent writings Harvey made clear the case for a deeply dialectical relationship between social processes and space, and he steadfastly argued that meaningful social transformations could never be brought about through spatial interventions alone.

"Should spatial forms simply be understood, for example, as passive outcomes of social processes," Harvey (2005: 212. Emphasis added) asked in the essay, *The Social and Geographical Imaginations*. "[O]r should spatial forms (such as a ghetto) be viewed as determinate or constitutive of social processes? *Planners and architects often acted as if a new social order could be produced simply by transforming spatial structures.*"

With Harvey's notion of the geographical imagination operating as a theoretical lens, this paper seeks to interrogate the relationship between urban parks and social processes. In particular it aims to explore the role that social issues have historically played in urban park design and to unpack the prevailing imaginaries of social justice landscape architects and designers have employed in contemporary urban park projects. In doing so it juxtaposes the lofty rhetoric of designing for social justice against the material reality of development-driven, speculative urban regeneration in which parks and park design regularly, and in some cases purposefully, contribute

to urban inequalities. In this way, the geographic imaginary provides a framework for understanding the limited capacity of urban park design to address broader social issues, even as it offers a mechanism for conceiving and articulating alternatives that more completely address the conditions through which social injustice occurs.

### **Defining the imaginary**

While Harvey's geographic imaginary served as Corner's touchstone for thinking through the relationship between park design and social justice, the notion of the imaginary has a much longer and broader connection to urban form. As a philosophical concept, the idea of the imaginary grew out of the early practice of psychoanalysis and the thinking of Jacques Lacan, who defined it as an internalized self-image, or representation, constructed by the subject as a means of negotiating relationships between the private and social realms (Campkin, 2013; Lacan, 1966).

For mid-20<sup>th</sup> century social scientists, however, the notion of the imaginary served as a powerful mechanism for understanding the nature of space. The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991), for instance, argued that space is not merely an abstraction – an empty and passive container waiting to be acted upon – but rather an entity that is socially produced, alive with layers of history, conflict and meaning, and therefore imbued with a certain productive capacity of its own. Even as space is being shaped by human activity through forces such as planning, economics, the political and the sexual, Lefebvre suggested, it in turn shapes the everyday lives of humans and their interactions. To Lefebvre (1996), then, to understand space means to understand the multitude of social processes – as well as the societal and political values – behind their production. The imaginary, he maintained, signifies the ways in which urban inhabitants experience and express – through symbols and representations – the socially produced spaces in which they live, work and play. The neo-Marxist thinker Cornelius Castoriadis also recognized this malleable nature of space, and he wrote of “place imaginaries” as symbolic

articulations of space from diverse and often conflicting perspectives (Campkin, 2013; Castoriadis, 1987). Like Lefebvre, Castoriadis saw these articulations not merely as reflective perceptions of material spaces, but as active and productive agents charged with value-laden cultural meanings that contribute to the contested production of space.

From this perspective, urban imaginaries are, in effect, “sets of meanings about cities that arise in specific historical time and cultural space” (Zukin et al, 1998: 629). Even more, they serve as a means of negotiating between the representational and the real, a synthesis of symbolic and material worlds, or what the geographer Neil Smith (1990) called “a bridge” between metaphorical space and physical space. Through the power of the imaginary, the lines between the figurative and the physical become blurred, and the object of representation – say, a city master plan or the proposed design for a building or an urban park – takes on the nature of the symbol through the production of the actual object. Put another way, the symbolic language of the imaginary becomes “real in all sorts of spatial and social practices, from urban design to housing policies,” (Zukin et al, 1998: 629).

At the same time, as the products of particular sets of values, imaginaries function as rhetorical devices for establishing authority and legitimacy. In this sense they become, as the geographer Derek Gregory notes, discursive mechanisms for persuasion, part of “...that vast network of signs, symbols and practices” (1994: 11) reflecting “the different ways in which the world is made present, re-presented, discursively constructed” (1994: 104). In related fashion, the philosopher Charles Taylor (2007: 172) describes the “social” imaginary as the way people perceive and make sense of their social surroundings – as expressed through images, legends and stories – and generate “common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”

Writing in the years between the two world wars, the German-Jewish cultural critic Walter Benjamin was among the first to recognize this representational power of the image, and through his Arcades Project he sought to critique the idea of the metanarrative, produced in the

name of reason, as a mechanism for mythologizing history as a continuous, organic march toward progress. Benjamin used the technique of montage – or the combination of individual images and fragments to create a new composite whole – as a textual practice for wrenching objects out of their historical context and exposing their hidden histories. As a result, a multiplicity of possible readings of the world are revealed, calling into question any taken-for-granted assumptions of inevitability and progress.<sup>4</sup> Of course inherent in such a view is the sense of the imaginary offering an idealized space for the critique of existing conditions as well as for the projection of alternative, even utopian, visions of social organization freed from the constraints of time or established values. "Benjamin's purpose," Gregory (1994: 240-241) writes, "was to prise open the texture of historical eventuation and create a space for revolutionary political action... conceiving of the history of the present in this way (and by this means) was a way of empowering the emancipatory production of human geographies."

Indeed this notion of the imaginary as possibility is a common thread from Lefebvre, Harvey and Taylor to the political geographer Benedict Anderson (1983), who argued that popular nationalism was the product of "imagined communities" in which members share a common understanding, and that such imaginaries could facilitate the creation of more egalitarian versions.

### **Geographic knowledge and the production of space**

To Harvey, however, like Lefebvre, the idea of the geographic imaginary is deeply rooted in more fundamental questions about space, especially how it is produced and the resulting relationships between its form and social processes. Of particular importance is the notion that spatial form is inseparable from, and in fact is constituted by, the human practices that take place within it.<sup>5</sup> Writing in *Social Justice and the City*, Harvey (1973: 13) uses the example of the property relationship to make his point. "Parcels of land," he notes,

capture benefits because they contain relationships with other parcels; the forces of demographic, market and rental potential are real enough within an urban system and in the form of rent relational space comes into its own as an important aspect of human practice.

To take that example further, in contemporary capitalist society private property real estate markets set the conditions by which people acquire shelter, while simultaneously serving as powerful mechanisms for the accumulation of wealth and the definition of neighborhood character. They influence not only who lives where, but under what circumstances and, in a certain sense, how societal attitudes about race, class, economic activity and opportunity as well as myriad other human relationships play out on the ground.

Once in place, however, particular spatial forms tend to exert an almost inertial force, embedding and normalizing the processes associated with their creation. This, in course, has reciprocal and long-lasting implications for potential social action and, as a result, raises important questions about how spatial forms are conceived, what they are conceived to do and the logic by which they take hold.

So how does this production of space occur? Because space is as much a “mental as material construct” (Harvey, 2005: 244), it can be experienced and expressed in a multitude of (not necessarily compatible) ways. Likewise, how we perceive, interpret and imagine any particular space at any point in time, is informed and influenced by all manner of information and sources. These sources are what Harvey calls the sites of “geographic knowledges,” and the information they produce is the stuff of our spatial consciousness. Each of these sites, in turn, operates according to its own logic and according to its own rules, producing its own distinct spatial awareness, or knowledges. How these discrete knowledges are “deployed” then plays a paramount role in the production of material geographic forms.

The state, for instance, as a site of knowledge production and through its associated mechanisms for planning,

institutes normative programs for the production of new geographical configurations and in so doing becomes a major site for orchestrating the production of space, the definition of territoriality, the geographical distribution of population, economic activity, social services, wealth and well-being. Normative geographical principles of spatial planning, land use, location, administration and development then become normalized within state apparatus. The production of geographical forms on the ground is responsive to how geographical knowledges function... (Harvey, 2005: 222).

In this context, geographic imaginaries are projections of specific geographic knowledges *and* the normative values and existing social norms on which those knowledges are built. As such they are always incomplete, ideologically situated and, as forms of discourse, inherently politicized – hence the contested nature and the power of the imaginary as a mechanism for representing particular idealized notions about space. Unpacking these imaginaries can reveal deep insight into the perspectives, ideas and intentions of their creators.

Spatial imaginary, of course, is a natural domain of planners, designers and landscape architects. By definition, architects and other spatial technicians work at creating spaces based on some notion of how they should function, how they are to be experienced and understood. They seek to influence not just what particular spaces look like, but what people do there, what types of experiences they can have, even what and how they should feel. At times designers can, and do, create their own imaginaries, serving as the initial imaginative force in a project's design. But

they also work in the service of others at which point their role is to translate the imaginaries of city officials, urban planners, real estate developers and others into representational and ultimately built form. For them the term “imaginary” conveys the sense of possibility associated with proposed changes to the urban environment, a vision of the future, both material and socially constructed, that takes shape through the symbolic power of their designs. Their colorful sketches and detailed renderings, models and plans are literal representations of imagined urban spaces and thus powerful bridges between the perceived purpose or role of a space and its proposed physical form.<sup>6</sup> This is especially true of urban parks and urban park design in which such visual devices are shot through with codes and symbols, barriers and pathways, conditions and physical interventions that literally steer viewers and, once made material in a built park, visitors toward the intended imaginary. As such they are illustrative of the stubborn belief that through the creative manipulation of space, designers can not only influence people and social interactions but, when approaching urban issues through a causal framework, even reshape social and economic processes.<sup>7</sup>

### **The imaginary of the pleasure ground**

Historically, the urban design world’s imaginary project has been closely linked to the notion of “cleansing” the city of its “‘natural’ predisposition to disorder,” and of architecture as a “civilising (sic) and disciplining instrument” (Campkin, 2013: 1-2). In the United States in the later half of the nineteenth century this belief extended directly to the practice of landscape design as social reformers and park promoters saw in nature “the amelioration of urban conditions” (Cranz, 1982: 137) and “the antidote to the disorder and materialism of city life” (Bachin, 2003: 13).<sup>8</sup> This particular imaginary was of an era in which the landscape was a powerful artistic and geographic concern.<sup>9</sup> It was also the product of a particularly deterministic approach to geographic knowledge, one that espoused the presumed power of spatial determinism and an emphasis on, if not outright fetishization of, space.<sup>10</sup> In designing Central Park, for instance,

Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux sought to bring what they viewed as the spiritual and moral harmony of nature to the urban environment. Olmsted (1908: 42), in particular, articulated a profound belief that nature's restorative qualities promoted democratic ideals and social order and counteracted “the evils of town life” by bringing together people “all classes... with a common purpose.”

While Olmsted’s initial intent was to create a truly democratic space, Central Park’s earliest legacy was quite the opposite. The land on which the park was built was seized from squatters and African American and immigrant homesteaders who faced discrimination and limited alternatives elsewhere in city (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992). To add insult to injury, Black laborers were not allowed to work on the park’s construction out of fear of strife with the Irish immigrants, a growing number of who were competing with African Americans for working-class jobs. Even from a design perspective, Olmsted conceived the park to privilege certain ideals – and users – over others. He insisted on inscribing into its design a code of behavior “appropriate for democratic society” that included a long list of rules, including no picnics, walking on the grass or strenuous activity. Together with the city’s spatial realities – particularly Central Park’s relative distance from downtown working class neighborhoods and the cost of what limited public transit existed at the time – the resulting space was rendered “genteel,” and the behavior permitted, in the words of historian Mike Wallace, was “Broadway refinement” (Burns, 1999).

In this way Central Park set the tone for early urban American park development by using design and the related aspect of programming, as well as ordinances and rules of conduct, to tightly prescribe public behavior. Conceived as romanticized “pleasure grounds,” these early parks were borne of a collective imaginary that as public spaces, parks could bridge social divides, help assimilate immigrants into American life and foster a shared sense of civic togetherness. They were designed to reduce, not reflect, the disorienting aspects of the city in the belief that within park spaces, “the inequalities so glaring in other parts of the city could fade

away" (Bachin, 2003: 16). Of course, such inequalities didn't so much fade away as become concealed behind a veneer of social unity that sought to mask conditions such as racism, poverty, lack of education and opportunity as well as their underlying causes.

### **Beauty and discipline: park design in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century**

Toward the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, civic leaders, urban planners and landscape designers began to reject this notion of the peaceful contemplation of nature as the primary role of parks. Proponents of the City Beautiful movement, for instance, envisioned large urban parks as civic attractions, essential elements in the beautification of the overall city that would promote the public good by attracting tourism and economic growth. Here, commercial and civic interests became intertwined, and beauty, in the words of architect and urban planner Daniel Burnham (1921), functioned as a "well-paying commodity" that promoted social wellbeing and financial prosperity.

Urban reformers of the time, meanwhile, championed small neighborhood parks and playgrounds as places where physical activity fostered clean habits and steered youth away from delinquency and crime. Drawing from the emerging field of sociology, which parsed statistics on crime, poverty and poor health to paint cities as sites of material degradation, disorder and danger, these reformers conceived of certain urban neighborhoods as pathological, as if physical space itself could be diseased and its condition spread like a virus to those inhabiting it. Parks geared toward active recreation, the reform imaginary proposed, would produce wholesome habits and a healthy, productive populace. In New York City in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a particularly paternalistic version of this approach took physical form in the swimming pools and playing fields built by Robert Moses. During Moses's 26-year tenure as New York City Parks Commissioner, more than 650 new parks and playgrounds were built, including 11 outdoor swimming pools constructed in 1936 alone (Gutman, 2007). To Moses this represented a rejection of parks as grand civic gestures; his imaginary was of parks as mechanisms for social

control, and making the unwashed working-class masses a “better public.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Urban decline and the economic imperative of parks**

The steady and continued decay of American cities during the post-World War II era brought about new shifts in the perception of parks and their role in urban life. As the exodus of industry and jobs, the spatial separation of domestic and work lives and the rise of the automobile and subsequent suburbanization emptied cities of their white and middle-class residents, municipal governments experienced a simultaneous erosion of support for the creation and maintenance of urban parks and other public spaces. Increasingly these spaces became associated with drug use, homelessness, graffiti, vandalism and violence. Indeed, in many ways they began to be seen as breeding grounds of the very pathologies earlier urban reformers had hoped to erase.

By the late 1970s, however, business interests and civic leaders had begun to pursue aggressive strategies for taking back the city, including an architectural and aesthetic “renaissance” (Campkin, 2013) in which park design would play a pivotal role. Within a broader focus on enhancing the quality of urban life, parks began to be viewed as mechanisms for driving economic development and reinvigorating downtown districts. Well-designed public spaces, this new imaginary held, would make urban areas more livable and attractive. To serve this function, however, parks also needed to be perceived as safe, so park design increasingly included security features – like cameras, fences and benches that discouraged sleeping<sup>12</sup> – and facilitated heavy programming in the belief that use would reduce vandalism, loitering by the homeless and other activities deemed undesirable by the civic elite. In an era of limited public resources, proponents turned to new mechanisms for funding their projects – including concessions and other forms of profit-seeking enterprise, private donations, real estate transfer taxes and property tax surcharges linked to rises in property values – and they established business improvement districts, semi-private conservancies, even private security forces to manage, maintain and police them. As such, this new park imaginary was reflective of the growing neoliberal orthodoxy taking hold at the

time, an orthodoxy in which public resources – including land and money – were regularly deployed to promote private capital accumulation by supporting business activity and encouraging increased real estate values.

“Beautiful parks make a city more attractive, which is to say, they make it more of an attraction,” park historian Cranz (1982: 208) wrote at the time. “When what is attracted to the city is money, in one form or another, then the beauty of the parks can be argued to be of particular social benefit, and anyone to whom this money trickles down is likely to agree.”

One early and particularly illustrative example of the period is Skyline Park in Denver. Designed by Lawrence Halprin, the three-block, 3.2-acre linear “urban oasis” was originally conceived during the 1960s as part of the federally funded urban renewal of Denver’s downtown. Early plans called for a design based on City Beautiful conventions, a nod to a bygone era that produced the city’s celebrated network of parks linked by parkways and boulevards (Hirsch, 2005). Halprin’s team, however, rejected that initial design as a mere path from one place to another and not a place in and of itself (Hirsch, 2005: 94). Instead, that team proposed a “choreographed processional space” in the form of mountain stream set in the urban environment. The general imaginary was that the park – which was designed and built in phases between 1970 and 1976 and managed as part of the Downtown Denver Business Improvement District by the Downtown Denver Partnership (DDP), a quasi-public consortium of property owners, business leaders and commercial interests – would contribute to the city’s distinct identity by evoking “the regional essence of Denver” and referencing its natural surroundings (Hirsch, 2005: 34). The resulting park, it was hoped, would attract retail stores, shoppers and tourists to a reinvigorated downtown and thereby strengthen “the city’s business appeal, tax base and overall quality” (Komara, 2012: 37).

Halprin, however, also sought to instill a strong sense of social purpose in Skyline Park’s design. In particular, he championed public participation in the design process as a means of addressing social equity and informing the changes taking place in the built environment during

the urban renewal era (Komara, 2012: 33). Collaborative planning, as Halprin practiced it, meant asking broad cross sections of existing communities – high school kids, retirees, hotel guests, shoppers and office workers – what they wanted in terms of public spaces. But the approach also was representative of Halprin’s general design imaginary, and it reflected an underlying belief that “design and social issues do not exist as separate entities” (Komara, 2012: 25). “Like Olmsted before him,” one journalist retrospectively wrote of Halprin’s plan for Skyline Park, “Lawrence Halprin succeeded in articulating a compelling social vision for the city. For Olmsted, the vision was one of pastoral relief from smoke and crowding; for Halprin, it was one of celebration of the city’s rambunctious vitality. Both viewed city parks and open spaces as a meeting ground for people of all classes” (Thompson, 1992).

True to its mission, Skyline Park initially helped spur the revitalization of Denver’s downtown. But over time rising estate values exerted new market and redevelopment pressures on the surrounding area, and the park was beset by a host of problems, including a lack of maintenance and its growing appropriation by “undesirables.”<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, its slow deterioration led to calls from the local business community for rethinking the park and its design, and in 2003 much of Halprin’s original version of Skyline Park was demolished and subsequently renovated.<sup>14</sup> In the end, Halprin’s design vision for Skyline Park represented a negotiation between conflicting intentions – his commitment to social equity and inclusion on the one hand, and the demands of real estate development and business interests on the other. This negotiation turned out to be rather one-sided as his view of the park as a space of “social enhancement” was overwhelmed by the demands of economic growth and capital accumulation.

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century this neoliberal imaginary of sanitized, highly programmed public spaces and the primacy of capital as the driving force behind park design had become increasingly entrenched, representing a full-blown and fundamental shift in the role of parks and park design. Today, that trend continues. While contemporary landscape design is far from a singular or unified field and debates over the direction of the practice span a wide

spectrum of ideas, the role of parks appears ever more tightly bound to the economic success and sustainability of the city “in the context of global capital, post-Fordist models of flexible production, and informal labor relations” (Waldheim, 2006: 15).

“Cities, at the root, are economic machines,” Corner, the lead designer of New York City’s High Line, noted in a 2016 interview about the role of landscape architects in shaping cities for the future. “They’re looking to attract residents, tourists, and the creative classes. They believe that the economics of the future are ground in this class, and they’re working like hell to attract these businesses and these people, and give their city a hip identity with an edge” (Sisson 2016).

The High Line, of course, is widely seen as the archetype of this new form of urban park.

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### **The High Line – a model for gentrification**

Championed by the administration of then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg as a city shaping urban design paradigm, the High Line has become the hallmark of a broader urban redevelopment movement in which city governments increasingly view high-design, “world-class” parks as driving mechanisms for economic development, “tools” geared as much toward attracting tourists and catalyzing real estate values as creating use amenities for local residents (Larson, 2013: 142-44; Loughran, 2014). Working closely with Friends of the High Line, the private, nonprofit organization that built, programs and maintains the park, the Bloomberg administration rezoned the area surrounding the then-abandoned elevated railway in 2005 and created a special West Chelsea development district to foster development interest and build momentum for the park plan. The city also supported the creation of a nearby Business Improvement District (BID) that would help fund the park’s operation and maintenance, and, through the New York City Economic Development Corporation, contributed \$123.2 million of the \$152.3 million for construction of the first two phases of the three-phase project. Through the city’s Department of

City Planning, the administration also helped set design guidelines for the park, including the articulation of design as a “civic virtue” capable of cultivating “habits important for the success of the community” (Larson, 2013:140).

Soon after its first phase opened in 2009, the High Line emerged as a go-to destination for developers, planners, public officials and designers interested in learning how to transform disused urban infrastructure into new public spaces. Part of the fascination, as the *New York Times* reported at the time, was the elevated-railway-turned-urban promenade’s economic impact and its role in transforming surrounding neighborhoods (Taylor, 2010). While the first segment of the High Line cost \$100 million to build, it attracted 34 new development projects worth more than \$2 billion to neighboring blocks, and, in its first year alone, drew 6.9 million visitors. To Amanda Burden, then director of the New York City Department of City Planning, the new park served as a shining example of “how design can be an amazing catalyst for private investment” (Krueger, 2011).

Hoping to generate similar results, city-backed rail-to-park projects in Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta and elsewhere adopted similar approaches for their own efforts at transforming disused transportation infrastructure, and made economic development and tourism central components of their designs. Mimicking not just the basic idea of converting abandoned rail lines into linear public spaces, proponents of these projects have turned to core groups of high-profile private supporters drawn from cultural institutions, civic organizations and the real estate, development and finance worlds to establish relationships with key city decision makers and build broader community backing, just as they have tapped a mix of public and private monies for funding both the construction and long-term operation of their plans.<sup>16</sup>

Also true to the High Line model, many of these projects have seen the mere announcement of their plans spur speculative real estate investment and the construction of nearby, mostly high-end condominiums and apartments as well as new retail corridors (Lerner, 2017; Vance, 2014).

This transferability of the High Line model to other cities has spawned a growing interest among geographers, anthropologists and other social scientists in the resulting socio-spatial impacts of such efforts. Loughran, for instance, writes of the High Line as the latest iteration of an ever-evolving process of neoliberal development in which public spaces are increasingly the products of “broader circuits of economic and cultural capital” (2014: 61), designed and operated to “serve the leisure and consumption practices of the new urban middle class and anchor the continued super-gentrification” of surrounding communities (2014: 56).

The High Line, for instance, is a heavily scripted promenade, a horizontal stage “immersed in commercial activity” (Loughren 2014: 62) that is intended to appeal to users who walk along its length, stopping in designated places to experience programmed events like art exhibits, musical performances or street performers and consume products sold by select licensed vendors. Little space is given over to chance or the possibility of the type of spontaneous public and democratic interaction that is at the core of more traditional city parks (Larson 2017). A long list of rules – including no balls, rollerblades, bikes or skateboards – only contributes to the sense that the park was designed to discourage some potential users – including residents of two nearby public housing developments – and uses.

Of course users have historically bent park space to their own purposes (as with skateboarders and homeless youth in Skyline Park) by subverting design intentions and ignoring rules. Still contemporary parks such as the High Line are imagined in ways both intentional and discrete to counter such efforts. Loughren (2014: 62) describes how mechanisms of “institutionalized social control” such as private security guards and uniformed park staff regulate “socio-spatial practices” – like tourists lounging as opposed to the homeless sleeping – along the High Line. Others have pointed out how constant programming and the High Line’s physical layout – including limited points of access,<sup>17</sup> narrow paths, and no areas for open play – conspicuously promote the intended exclusivity and control.

Within this context, any social benefits that parks might provide for local residents are widely seen to flow from, if not be a function of, their wider economic benefits. Recently, however, even park promoters have begun to acknowledge the exclusive nature of their projects and question their speculative impact on surrounding communities. In September 2017, two members of the executive board of the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership, the public/private organization overseeing that city's redevelopment of a 22-mile rail corridor, resigned, expressing the fear that the project "could worsen rather than help resolve inequality" (Lerner, 2017: 133). Around the same time, Robert Hammond, co-founder and executive director of Friends of the High Line, offered a revised assessment of the High Line's design and its effect on the surrounding area. "We were from the community. We wanted to do it for the neighborhood," Hammond told the online publication *CityLab* (Bliss, 2017). "Ultimately, we failed. Instead of asking what the design should look like, I wish we'd asked, 'What can we do for you?' People have bigger problems than design."

### **The false promise of socially just park design**

To be sure, the ascendant imaginary of public parks as a vehicle of capital accumulation raises important questions about public space and related notions of spatial capital. For instance, who has the right to imagine the future form of the city, and through what mechanisms is that right granted? Who gets to determine what constitutes social value and to control narratives of degradation and decay? If cities are being designed to attract the already successful, what becomes of those who aren't? And how then do cities begin to deal with seemingly intractable issues such as poverty, affordable housing, racism and equitable opportunity?

In fairness, certain elements of the landscape architecture community have responded to capital's seizure of the imaginary by reasserting that parks and park design can and should play a fundamental role in addressing social concerns. In June 2016, more than 700 members of the Landscape Architecture Foundation (2016) gathered in Philadelphia to craft "a new vision for

landscape architecture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” The resulting declaration opens with the recognition that global society has entered into an age of extreme climate change and “accelerating consumption, urbanization and inequity” that disproportionately impact the poor. It then goes on to assert that “[A]s designers versed in both environmental and cultural systems, landscape architects are uniquely positioned” to “address complex social and ecological problems” by giving “artistic form and integrated function to the ideals of equity, sustainability, resiliency and democracy” (Landscape Architecture Foundation, 2016).

Such language is indicative of a sense – one that continues to percolate through the landscape architecture community – that design is well suited to serve as a tool for elevating social interaction. Within this context, the concept of socially just park design regularly translates to a list of general themes that includes improving neighborhoods; creating more human spaces; generating diversity, equity and inclusiveness; reconnecting people to nature and to each other; and enhancing the overall quality of urban life.<sup>18</sup>

As the LAF’s declaration suggests, however, this imaginary is often vague, its underlying concepts undeveloped and undefined, and their relationship to the deeper root causes of social injustice seldom critically explored. What, for instance, makes a space “more human,” and what constitutes “quality of life?” And what forms of diversity, inclusivity and equity are to be encouraged? This vagueness, in part, is the result of a pragmatic recognition by many landscape design practitioners that while the imaginary can serve as a mechanism for proposing alternative visions of proposed public spaces, when a park design moves from the symbolic to the material it jumps from the realm of the conceptual – or a world of broad possibility, desires and ideas – to a more rigid reality structured by not just by physical details (climate zones, soil conditions, zoning and land-use regulations, etc.) but more importantly client demands, politics, the tenants of property ownership and the economics of real estate development.

To put it another way, for any design, including a proposed park, to successfully make the move from concept to built project, it must engage with and on some level be made palatable

to the material demands of contemporary capitalism. This is especially true in an environment where economic and real estate development drive the work, and funding for the construction and maintenance of urban park projects increasingly comes from public private partnerships and civic patronage in the form of highly invested, highly connected “Friends of” organizations and private philanthropy. In turn, these groups and the city planning boards and economic development offices that support them are compelled by their own geographic knowledges, and they generally view parks as engines for urban revitalization, developing city identity and creating the conditions for generating more private capital. In addition, more often than not, the critical planning, policy and economic decisions related to park design are determined well before a landscape architect is even hired. What park designers are able to imagine within the context of such client-practitioner relationships is bounded by existing conditions and the geographic knowledges that produced them. Because at the present juncture the forces directing park design are generally more interested in embedding existing social relationships in the built environment than changing them, any efforts by designers hoping to address issues of social inequity are destined to run headlong into the very forces that generate those inequities in the first place.

In the end, this dynamic has produced a contemporary urban park imaginary that is frustratingly stunted, one that is built around isolated, circumscribed views of what constitutes social justice – equity, inclusion, sustainability and democracy, for instance, each on their own – and limited proposals for promoting it, like planning parks in underserved neighborhoods and opening the planning and design processes to a broad range of community voices so as to at least offer the illusion of creating spaces that are inclusive in terms of programming and use.<sup>19</sup>

As we have seen, this current reality comes on top of a long history of urban parks designed to promote some notion of social justice but which ultimately fall short. From the creation of Central Park on, parks have been portrayed as important vehicles for the production of space in the hope of revolutionizing social relationships in general, and contributing to the creation of more socially just urban environments in particular. That park design has failed in this

regard stems largely from the faulty premise that spatial form is a basic determinant of human behavior, and that transformations of space alone can bring about meaningful social change.

But eventually even the most socially conscious designers must confront the conflicting impulses of parks within a private property regime. On the one hand is their nature as truly open public spaces. On the other is their potential as resources for enhancing the landscape of accumulation. As history shows, efforts to make urban parks vehicles of social justice have been regularly co-opted or hijacked by unequal social relationships and inevitably commandeered by those with the most money and power. In every case, the restless resolve of capital has overwhelmed all other intentions, sweeping aside notions of cohesion, the mixing of classes and civic order in the name of the greater good.

Within this context, what park design can contribute to the cause of social justice is partial and incomplete, and its interventions amount to treating specific symptoms of injustice isolated from their causes. While park design might lessen, say, the inequity of green space or help redistribute park resources to underserved neighborhoods, it can do nothing to address more systemic underlying issues – racism and sexism, poverty, homelessness, income inequality, economic disparity, to name just a few – or to transform the underlying social dynamics at the very heart of unjust urban environments. Indeed, urban park imaginaries have proven far more effective at turning attention from and in many cases contributing to those very real and very persistent systemic conditions than ameliorating them.

### **Towards an emancipatory reality**

But if the inequities embedded in park design began as the products of an imaginary exercise, what about the realization of a truly just city? Can the imaginary, as conceived by Harvey, Benjamin and others, serve as a meaningful tool for bringing about the requisite restructuring of social and economic relations? To do so it must lead to a truly radical break, one that comes in the form of wholly new modes of spatial production and alternative forms of

geographic practice from which it is possible to imagine and therefore design urban parks and public spaces outside the bounds of a system of that privileges exchange value over use value. Given the deep and historically consistent connection between park design and property values, as well as the role housing mediated through the market plays in creating economic inequality and social injustice, that break begins with establishing (and enforcing) housing as a basic human right and by removing it from the market altogether.

Of course, both the notion of private property as a foundational principal of the American dream and the related sense of growth through development as a mechanism for fostering American ideals are so fully embedded, so uncritically accepted, that it is almost impossible to imagine a society without them. Perhaps this is especially true in the current moment, one defined by an American president born and bred of the development imaginary, its metanarratives and the geographic knowledge(s) that produce them. At the very least, the sense that market-oriented economic development should be the driving purpose of park design, and that through it some form of social justice can be achieved, continues to be reinforced by representations in the architectural and popular media. “From Philadelphia to Seattle,” *New York Times* architecture writer Michael Kimmelman (2017) recently wrote, “... American cities are also banking on parks and public spaces to drive social and economic progress.”

Yet such a moment also provides a particularly powerful opportunity to push back against such narratives and to reclaim the potential of utopianism to undermine the solidified practices of capitalist urbanism. The essential challenge, however, remains: how to move beyond the idea of the more socially just city to the creation of one. As the geographer Loretta Lees (2004: 6) cautions, “[A]bstraction from the particular and the actual produces the power to imagine better and more just worlds... the utopian focus on no place raises important questions about how to realize those ideals in some place.”

In this sense, the imaginary must serve as a vehicle not only for articulating alternative, transformative visions of space, but for the means of bringing them about. Already there is no

shortage of experimentation with mechanisms for wrenching housing from the market.

Community land trusts, land banks and other forms of cooperative ownership all represent actually existing means, borne of the search for alternatives to the hegemonic metanarrative of private property. To be sure, such interventions have proven limited, with contested histories and uneven records.<sup>20</sup> But they represent valuable starting points, experiences that can be mined for corrective insights, effective strategies and further opportunity.

By no means should the search for potential alternatives and sources of inspiration end there. The quest for more just alternatives to market-based housing must be necessarily expansive and transgressive, open to embracing new sources of inspiration and entirely new conceptions of land, public space, beauty and value. As the architect Tedy Cruz and political theorist Fonna Forman (2016) note, “[T]he most relevant new urban practices and projects promoting social and economic inclusion are emerging not from sites of economic power but from sites of scarcity and zones of conflict, where citizens themselves, pressed by socioeconomic injustice, are pushed to imagine alternative possibilities.”

Of course such efforts and ideas are and will be contested. In order to establish the political will required for such radical change, any potential interventions and the geographic knowledges on which they are built must be rigorously theorized and vigorously defended. This will require forceful and deliberate engagement with designers, city planners, community residents and organizations, indeed all those capable of envisioning a future where profit is not the driving force behind every aspect of human existence.

Within this context, parks and park design are – and can only ever be – one piece of a much larger set of necessary interventions. But once divorced from any connection to nearby property values, parks would be free to be shaped by existing communities’ needs and desires, whatever those may be. Only then will park design have the capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the production of truly just urban spaces.



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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Olmsted is widely regarded as the founder of American landscape architecture. In to Central Park, his landscape designs include the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> In a 2003 interview with the journal *Preservation*, Halprin argued for a more egalitarian approach to thinking about public space. "I think it is important to ask yourself what you're designing a landscape for," he said. "Do you design based on fear? So that drug dealers can't come? Teenagers? I think it's important to recognize that teenagers and drug dealers are citizens." (Bennett P (2003) Lost in translation: Modernist landscapes of the 1960s and '70s reflect the idealism of the times. Now they are being replaced with designs for a less hopeful age. *Preservation*, 56(3):38)

<sup>3</sup> Harvey identifies the lack of the spatial in Mills' sociological imagination, noting that it privileges time and history over space. Harvey then sets out to bridge the "disjunction" between Mills' sociological imaginary and the geographical imaginary he had identified. That bridge, he argues, "required... an adequate philosophy of social space" (Harvey 2005: 213).

<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive unpacking of Benjamin's ideas and his relationship to the imagining is beyond the scope of this paper. For a more complete discussion of the Arcades Project and related concepts see Buck-Morss, S (1992). *Aesthetics and Anesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; and Eagleton, T (1990) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>5</sup> In *Social Justice and the City*, Harvey argues that, "It is unnecessarily naïve to think in terms of simple causal relationships between spatial form and social process (whichever way we choose to point the causal arrow)" (Harvey 1973: 46).

<sup>6</sup> The landscape architects at Hanna/Olin, for instance, described their master plan for Houston's Hermann Park as "a responsive catalyst that engages the community and creates momentum to translate their aspirations for the park into physical form..." (Hanna/Olin, 1995: 13).

<sup>7</sup> Harvey singles out the city planner Ebenezer Howard as an example of one who sought to "modify the spatial form of a city and thereby to mould the social process" (Harvey 1973: 26).

<sup>8</sup> A comprehensive history of parks and the ideals that have shaped them is beyond the scope of this paper. For a more complete discussion of early urban parks in this context see Bachin 2003 and Cranz 1982.

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<sup>9</sup> The works of the Hudson River School are one example. Founded by Thomas Cole, the movement's paintings depict the American landscape as a space of adventure and discovery, as well as an idealized setting in which nature and human beings coexist.

<sup>10</sup> Environmental determinism, or the idea that the physical environment predetermines human culture and societal development, was an emerging feature of geographic thinking at the time (see, for example, the work of geographer Ellen Semple. For a concise, critical discussion of environmental determinism in American geography see Mitchell D (2000) *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

<sup>11</sup> The quote, which is attributed to then-Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, is cited in Gutman 2007: 73. It is from an interview, conducted by Dean Albertson in the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University. The full interview is available online at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/perkinsf/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the privatization and militarization of public space in the era, see Chapter 4, Fortress LA, in Davis M (1990) *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. London and New York: Verso.

<sup>13</sup> "In the war between street kids and the Downtown Denver Partnership, Skyline Park is ground zero," a local journalist wrote in 2002. "On the 16th Street Mall at Arapahoe, Palomino's flower-bedecked patio seats businesspeople and well-dressed ladies who lunch. On the other side of the patio's fence are kids who sometimes panhandle, use drugs and relieve themselves in the cozy sunken park" (Kreck C (2002) Downtown truce at Skyline Park; businesses funding resource center to ease problems with street youths. *Denver Post*, June 30; quoted in Hirsch).

<sup>14</sup> For more on the design and the history of Skyline Park see Komara, 2003, and Hirsch, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the High Line in general, and it as a model for contemporary urban park development in particular, see Linder C and Rosa B (eds) (2017) *Deconstructing the High Line: Postindustrial Urbanism and the Rise of the Elevated Park*. New Brunswick, Camden and Trenton, N.J. Rutgers University Press.

<sup>16</sup> For a critical examination of one example of this process, see Larson, S (2017) "A High Line for Queens: Celebrating diversity or displacing it?" In Linder C and Rosa B (eds) (2017) *Deconstructing the High Line: Postindustrial Urbanism and the Rise of the Elevated Park*. New Brunswick, Camden and Trenton, N.J. Rutgers University Press.

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<sup>17</sup> “The High Line's elevated structure naturally pre-empts street-level walk-ins;” journalist Laura Bliss notes. “There are 10 staircase entries placed along its 21-block span” (Bliss 2017).

<sup>18</sup> This list of terms was compiled by the author at the conference, Leading with Landscape II: The Houston Transformation, held March 11-13, 2016 in Houston. Though the conference was not explicitly about parks and social justice, participants frequently invoked the theme in their presentations.

<sup>19</sup> At the policy level, this limited imaginary has taken form through efforts like New York City's Community Parks Initiative (<http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/framework-for-an-equitable-future/community-parks-initiative/caring>) and Parks Without Borders program (<https://www.nycgovparks.org/planning-and-building/planning/parks-without-borders>).

<sup>20</sup> For more on community land trusts, see, for example: Davis JE (2010) *The Community Land Trust Reader*. Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy; Angotti T (2007) *Community Land Trusts and Low-Income Multifamily Rental Housing: The Case of Cooper Square, New York City*. Lincoln Land Policy Working Paper; and Moore T and McKee K (2012) Empowering Local Communities? An International Review of Community Land Trusts. *Housing Studies*, 27(2): 280-290.