

As Large Majorities of the World’s People Migrate to Cities, the Park Professions Need to Significantly Ramp Up the Focus on Urban Parks

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IN ATTENDING THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY CONFERENCE on Tuesday, March 31, 2015, I was able to attend a session called The Growing Importance of Urban Parks. I had the honor of listening to this contributed papers session, as presented by Melissa Guerrero, Joseph Edmiston and Amy Lethbridge, Elizabeth Perry, Lincoln Larson, and Xiao Xiao. Each presenter highlighted their own section of emphasis within significant urban park projects and studies to be summarized in the next section.

Melissa Guerrero, and Joseph Edmiston and Amy Lethbridge’s presentations about Grey to Green and “Natural Parks” demonstrated innovative and successful urban park strategies. The Grey to Green projects revolved around Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) preservation and management efforts, based on watershed and flood control efforts around Los Angeles River and metropolitan areas. Accomplished projects such as Vista Hermosa Natural Park, Marsh Park, Compton Creek Natural Park, and Pacoima Wash Natural Park have all been parks created in the name of water conservation by the MRCA and other partners. As well as enhancing the quality of water for the Los Angeles river, these parks also serve as valuable spaces for outdoor recreation to communities around the city. Joseph Edmiston and Amy Lethbridge talked about similar efforts in Los Angeles; however, their focus dialed in on providing urban parks as social justice. As claimed by Lethbridge, park programs at Vista Hermosa Natural Park are a hit with the community, especially since the community was well involved in the park planning processes.

Lincoln, Xiao Xiao, and Elizabeth Perry brought in more quantitative data to share about urban parks. Lincoln discussed a study conducted to explore urban parks and human well-being. His studies revealed that park expenditures had no relation to the perception of quality experiences at urban parks and that single people generally responded with lower marks of happiness. Xiao Xiao conducted a study for the National Park Service showing park perceptions from White, Black, and Hispanic population perspectives. Elizabeth Perry introduced us to the concept of “partnerships” including the value of in-depth research showing the relationship of people and

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sense of place in communities. According to Perry, the three most important pillars of designing an urban park are to have interviews, show resilience, and include multiple voices. By doing this, communities can feel their needs, and environmental needs, will be taken care of.

Reflection

Students interested and involved in urban parks must be aware of the needs of local communities as well as ecology, in order to continue the legacy of socio-environmentalism as the presenters demonstrated. I found that the “Grey to Green and Nature Parks” were great examples of meaningful, beneficial projects to be built upon further by students and upcoming professionals. Parks created under Grey to Green set precedence for taking underutilized spaces, and turning them into community hot spots while also functioning as an ecological system supporting the Los Angeles River watershed. Setting Nature Parks around urban neighborhoods is another great way to engage communities with high levels of barriers to reaching national parks. These two examples, plus the research synthesized by the rest of the speakers, are just the beginning of introducing parks into everyday urban American lives. With further research and effort put forth into similar projects, students and current professionals alike can invest in urban park projects, so as to make green open space available around the globe.