

## Why Urban Parks: A Matter of Equity?

*Equity: justice according to natural law or right; specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism (antonym: inequity).*

**O**n a normal Sunday afternoon, Chapultepec Park in Mexico City (Figure 1) is filled to capacity with throngs of people—so many, in fact, that no grass survives beneath the trees of the park, except in areas fenced off from human use. The activities in Chapultepec Park are similar to the activities in Central Park in New York or the Bois de Boulogne in Paris on a Sunday afternoon. People of all ages and various walks of life are strolling, chatting, eating, playing games, boating, and generally enjoying themselves. Although not exactly free of congestion, the park does offer a strong contrast to the surrounding city in many ways. It is primarily a pedestrian zone, in contrast to the automobile-clogged city streets nearby. Its canopy of trees, curving paths, fountains, and lakes all serve to encourage a different pace, a Sunday pace. That is to say, it is a landscape dedicated to leisure, as opposed to work. It is also a landscape dedicated to the aesthetic of “nature.” It is soft, absorbent, and green in contrast to the paved, walled, hard surfaces of the rest of the urban environment. Representing “nature” in the heart of the city, the public park is the *other* landscape, by which the city defines itself. Chapultepec Park is Mexico City’s public pleasure garden, clearly much loved and much used by residents of this thriving metropolis.

It is easy to take public parks like Chapultepec Park at face value, simply as pleasurable places to spend a Sunday afternoon. But it is important to remember that public parks are a potent symbol of certain principles that should never really be taken at face value. For one thing, they symbolize the principle of equity. The notion of equity has been intrinsic to public parks since they first began to proliferate around the world in the nineteenth century. The first public parks were a potent symbol, in the nineteenth century, of an increasing emphasis on equity as a governing principle in public affairs. Equity is a term with several

meanings, but the most common definition is: justice according to natural law or right; specifically, freedom from bias or favoritism. This meaning of equity is a product of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the natural rights possessed by individuals. The public park, as a civic institution, was conceived to correct certain injustices, or inequities, that were perceived to be in violation of natural law. The concept of natural law guarantees certain basic or universal rights, across the social spectrum, rights that transcend political, social, or economic status; for example, the right to the pursuit of



Figure 1. Like many urban parks, Chapultepec Park in Mexico City offers people a contrast to the “hardscape” of the city. Photo by the author.

happiness.

People enjoying themselves in a public park on a Sunday afternoon are certainly exercising their right to pursue happiness. It is amazing to realize that two hundred years ago most people would not have had access to this particular method of pursuing happiness. In the eighteenth century, parks were the exclusive property of aristocrats; ordinary people were not allowed to enjoy them. The first parks in Europe were actually former aristocratic properties: in the eighteenth century, hunting parks and private gardens were gradually opened to the public for special events and on festival days. In the nineteenth century, these private properties were trans-

formed completely into public parks. That century was a period of major transition throughout the world from autocratic systems of government to government by a broader-based public. In Europe and in many former European colonies throughout the world, monarchies were being transformed into republics, sometimes through violent conflict, sometimes through more gradual, peaceful processes. Public parks were a potent symbol of this transformation. An example can be seen in the famous parks of London, such as Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens, and Saint James Park. These parks evolved from royal parks into public pleasure grounds in the nineteenth century, and their

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transformation represented the increasing democratization of government as the British Parliament gained power and influence. The example of the London parks was widely emulated in other cities throughout Europe and European colonies as public parks and gardens in the “English style” proliferated in the nineteenth century.

The first public parks in the United States were heavily influenced by English parks, and were also firmly grounded in natural law and the principle of equity. Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the most eloquent nineteenth-century spokesmen for public parks, left a voluminous body of work, including many written justifications of the idea of public parks. These documents reveal that he was a firm believer in the basic principles of natural law. Olmsted argued that “it is the main duty of government, if not the sole duty of government, to provide means of protection for all its citizens in the pursuit of happiness.” An important ingredient of happiness, according to Olmsted, was the ability to rest from work, or, in other words, the right to leisure. Throughout much of history, leisure was a luxury enjoyed by the aristocracy. But in the nineteenth century, workers throughout the world gained increasing political power and pressured governments for a limited work week and a guarantee of leisure, protected by law. As public parks proliferated in cities throughout the nineteenth century, they represented this newly guaranteed right to leisure for a much broader public, including working men and women. Public parks were a potent symbol of the more equitable distribution of

leisure that occurred in the nineteenth century. Olmsted often linked happiness and leisure in his writings and public addresses. For example, in an important address entitled “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” he argued that the urban park should be a place “to which people may easily go after their day’s work is done ... where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets, where they shall, in effect, find the city put far away from them.” Olmsted designed the urban park as an antidote to the stresses and pressures of urban life. He felt that the constant demands of work in modern cities inhibited the pursuit of happiness.

Olmsted linked the aesthetic enjoyment of nature to the pursuit of happiness. He wrote that “the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character ... not only gives pleasure for the time being but increases the subsequent capacity for happiness.” Public parks in the United States were intended to make the aesthetic enjoyment of nature available to a broader public, i.e., to distribute more equitably the pleasure that Olmsted, and those of his class, believed could be derived from contemplating natural scenery. Designing urban parks, such as Central Park in New York, Olmsted took “nature” as his model, creating a landscape of woods and meadows that recalled the countryside beyond the city limits. His goal was to make the experience of nature available to ordinary, working people living in modern, industrial cities. The increasing industrialism of the nineteenth century separated people from

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the experience of nature, forcing large migrations, especially in the working class, from farms to factories. Olmsted, and other proponents of public parks in the United States, argued that this was not only detrimental to the pursuit of happiness, but also inequitable, because people of means could still enjoy natural scenery, while the working class did not possess the means to do so.

Olmsted emphasized that the aesthetic appreciation of nature should not be restricted to “heads of government” and “the wealthy classes,” that it should not be “a monopoly, in a very peculiar manner, of a very few, very rich people.” However, while Olmsted may have believed that the aesthetic enjoyment of nature was a basic human right, he also believed that it was an acquired taste. He noted that “the power of scenery to affect men is, in a large way, proportionate to the degree of their civilization and the degree in which their taste has been cultivated. Among a thousand savages there will be a much smaller number who will show the least sign of being so affected than among a thousand persons taken from a civilized community. This is only one of the many channels in which a similar distinction between civilized and savage men is to be generally observed.” This passage is a potent reminder that public parks served powerful political ideologies in the nineteenth century.

For people like Olmsted, public parks were a symbol of democracy, as opposed to traditional, hereditary systems of government. Olmsted viewed public parks as a means to educate and elevate the political base in a democra-

cy. He worked in a time when democracy was far from secure in the United States; its democratic ideals and national sovereignty were being severely tested, both during and after the American Civil War. Olmsted believed that it was the duty of members of the “new aristocracy” in the United States (by which he meant educated, powerful, self-made men of means) to bring a certain level of “civilization” to the masses, thereby strengthening the whole political system.

It must be noted, however, that public parks were not exclusively created by democratic republics in the nineteenth century. Public parks were also created by monarchies. Napoleon III, of France, for example, constructed an impressive network of parks in Paris during the Second Empire. In his effort to characterize the Second Empire as the “peoples’ empire,” Napoleon III anchored key Parisian neighborhoods with public parks. These neighborhoods represented key political constituencies that Napoleon III depended on for his political power. The public parks of the Second Empire were intended as a potent political symbol of the emperor’s commitment to equity. By creating a series of public parks throughout Paris, he aimed to demonstrate to his political supporters that the monarchy was paying attention to certain basic rights, such as health, leisure, and the pursuit of happiness. The public parks of New York may have symbolized American democratic ideals, but the public parks of Paris symbolized Napoleon III’s vision of monarchy in France. Both were rooted in notions

about basic rights and equity.

*Equity: (a) a right, claim, or interest existing or valid in equity; (b) the money value of a property or of an interest in a property in excess of claims or liens against it; (c) a risk interest or ownership right in property.*

The foregoing examples have illustrated how one definition of equity, signifying social justice and based in natural law, was an intrinsic principle underpinning the public park in the nineteenth century. But another definition of equity also applies to the public park, as a product of the nineteenth century. The term “equity” also signifies monetary value, and in that century, public parks represented considerable equity of this kind. The idea of public parks took hold around the world not only because they served certain political agendas and represented certain ideals of social justice, but also, in large part, because of real estate speculators who began to view them as a marketable amenity. As public parks proliferated in cities around the world, they were linked to an international wave of real estate speculation.

An early example was Regent’s Park in London, which was developed in 1811 as the setting for a series of expensive villas, marketed to members of the English upper class, including both the landed aristocracy and the wealthy, industrial bourgeoisie. The developers of Regent’s Park recognized that many members of this class wanted a house in the city for the social season, but missed some of the comforts of their country manors when they moved to the city, particularly their private parks and pleasure

grounds. Regent’s Park was intended to simulate a country estate in the city, with row houses surrounding it on the periphery and detached villas located throughout the interior. Although originally intended as a private park, it was opened to the general public in 1838, as the other royal parks in London were also opening to public use.

Another English example of the link between public parks and real estate was Birkenhead Park in Liverpool, also developed as a setting for housing, although aimed at the more modest, “middling” class. Birkenhead Park was open to the public from its inception, and its houses proved highly popular. Olmsted was much impressed by Birkenhead Park when he visited Liverpool as a young man, long before he became involved with Central Park in New York. Real estate speculators were also instrumental in developing the parks in Paris during the Second Empire; in fact, scandals that emerged in that regard eventually forced the resignation of Baron Haussman, the Prefect of the Seine, who was in charge of rebuilding Paris under Napoleon III. In New York, the selection of a site for Central Park was held up for years due to competition among landowners and speculators who stood to gain, or lose, from one site or another. That scenario was repeated in innumerable cities across the United States, as public parks were proposed by prominent citizens from San Francisco to Buffalo.

The public park, as a new public institution, received vital support from a powerful and influential bourgeoisie with increasing international ties who recognized the potential equity of

public parks, not only in terms of political and social capital, but as financial capital. The members of this bourgeoisie were educated, well traveled, interconnected, and politically influential. They advocated public parks because they believed that they would improve the image of a city, and therefore make it more attractive to new business investors. What kind of businessman would want to bring his family to live in a city with no public park? This class of citizens supported public parks around the world, under various political systems, with varying degrees of risk and varying amounts of altruism, but always with an eye towards this other meaning of equity. Some realized direct returns on their investments in terms of rising real-estate values or other financial gains directly linked to public parks. Others only gained symbolic capital. But regardless of the financial equations in individual cases, the overall result was that public parks proliferated in cities around the world, from Beijing to Cape Town, from New York to Havana, from Saint Petersburg to Mexico City.

Today these public parks are a ubiquitous element in the urban fabric, offering green relief from the glare, noise, and pollution produced by industry and commerce. They are cherished oases amidst the hardscape of modern cities. Most are heavily used and meticulously maintained. The equity values that were embedded in these parks in the nineteenth century are still intrinsic to them today, although obscured by nearly two centuries of habit and imitation. It is important, once in a while, to brush off the layers of historic dust that have accumulated on these parks, obscuring their social, political, and ethical meanings. Doing so not only reminds us of the historic period that produced them, but also stimulates us to reconsider the values that public parks embody in cities today. Do they represent time-honored or outdated ideas about equity? Does the notion of equity enter into the picture at all any more? If so, have ideas about parks and equity changed? These are important questions to be asking as we begin not only a new century, but a new millennium of park design.

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Heath Schenker, University of California–Davis, Department of Environmental Design/Landscape Architecture, 1 Shields Avenue, Davis, California 95616; hmschenker@ucdavis.edu

