

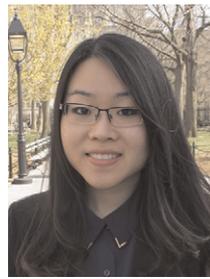
## EDITOR'S CHOICE

# Protecting Public Places

In this issue of the *Journal*, several articles report on efforts to improve public places (e.g., public parks, public schools, public infrastructure) to promote public health and well-being. Our own social and systems science research investigates the critical relationships among the grey (“built”) and green (“natural”) elements of cities and human interactions. We are particularly interested in understanding how ordinary spaces are transformed into sacred places—places that tie us to our past, our present, and our future. And further, how our reverence for sacred places engenders sacred moments, including both extraordinary acts of heroism and everyday gestures of human kindness.

Using the lens of sacredness, we sought to shine a light on findings regarding an enhanced sense of well-being that might have been less visible at first glance. For instance, Christian et al. (p. \*\*\*) studied the implementation of a “Livable Neighborhoods” code, but did not find increased walking in the intervention areas compared with the conventional developments. Nonetheless, residents of livable versus conventional neighborhoods had more positive perceptions of where they lived, including agreeing that they had access to infrastructure and safety for walking and an aesthetically pleasing environment. Chin and Ludwig (p. \*\*\*\*), on the other hand, were able to document increased vigorous physical activity in public school children through implementation of the “Recess Enhancement Program,” which involves more adult supervision and less equipment to reduce costs and barriers to children playing games later on their own. Study observers noted that teachers and other school personnel enjoyed watching and learning from play coaches and sometimes led children in games when the coach was absent. Finally, following installation of a barrier at Jacques-Cartier Bridge, which connects Montréal Island and Montérégie, Québec, Perron et al. (p. \*\*\*\*) found little or no displacement to other suicidal jumping sites. Preventing access to symbolic suicide magnets does not address the underlying psychological distress of individuals, but it may delay follow-through on impulsive acts.

Lately, scientific attention on open spaces and sacred places has sought to understand how the processes of collaborative planning and stewardship can support recovery from a wide range of human, natural, technological, and political disasters (Tidball K, Svendsen E, Campbell L, Falxa-Raymond N. Landscapes of resilience: understanding the creation and stewardship of open spaces and sacred places in Joplin, MO, and Detroit, MI. Available at: <http://civicecology.org/tkf.php>. Accessed April 15, 2013). For those of us in New York City and the surrounding region, Hurricane Sandy proved to be, in the words of Michael Kimmelman, an “existential challenge to the messy democracy we’ve devised” (Vetoing business as usual after the storm. *New York Times*. November 19, 2012. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/arts/design/changes-needed-after-hurricane-sandy-include-politics.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/arts/design/changes-needed-after-hurricane-sandy-include-politics.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0). Accessed April 15, 2013). Kimmelman argues that while



the infrastructure challenges that lie ahead to protect the region and its people are monumental tasks, “more difficult still will be staring down the pain, dislocation and inequity that promise to upend lives, undo communities and shake assumptions about city life and society.” In the final analysis, “saving New York and the whole region for the centuries ahead will become a test of civic unity.”

We agree. A corollary is that by working together to protect public places, we are afforded the opportunity to safeguard all members of society, including its most vulnerable. And in the intimate acts of caring for one another and the sacred places that we treasure—as in relief efforts to bring food and water to stranded older adults and organizing volunteers to restore damaged parks and playgrounds—we demonstrate the resiliency of the human spirit and bear witness to the recovery of even the most devastated landscapes.

While finalizing this column, we read Colum McCann’s moving account of an Easter miracle in Northern Ireland that occurred 15 years ago, namely, the Good Friday peace agreement (Remembering an Easter miracle in Northern Ireland. *New York Times*. March 30, 2013. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/sunday-review/remembering-an-easter-miracle-in-northern-ireland.html>. Accessed April 15, 2013). Every age has its horrific conflicts, no less our own. And yet, according to McCann, “the desire for peace asserts itself as the most basic human right.” After brokering the Good Friday peace agreement with dignity and resolve, the US envoy to Northern Ireland, George Mitchell, arrived home to New York City on an evening flight, went to church on Easter Sunday, and then took a walk with his wife and infant son in Sheep Meadow, Central Park. “They strolled around, marveling in the ordinary.” And found the sacred in a public place worth protecting for generations to come. ■

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