

## **PARK RESOURCES AS AN ESSENTIAL TO URBAN SOCIETIES**

Kristin Dion, Doug Stefancik, Serena Hawkins

Robert Bristow

Respectfully, student, student, student and Professor.

Department of Geography and Regional Planning,  
Westfield State College, Westfield, MA 01086

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**Abstract:** Open recreation space is a necessity to urban environments. People who reside in a crowded living condition need to have a place where they can go to escape everyday pressures and stress. Many have realized the importance of recreation space as a place to recuperate both physically and mentally. Overtime, parks have evolved to become an array of different types of resources ranging from a preserved piece of the natural landscape to a highly artificial habitat. Urban parks are known to contribute such benefits as physical health, mental health, stress relief, relaxation, self-realization, provide an escape mechanism, and provide psychological benefits. This paper highlights some of these reasons with a brief literature review and introduces a community's quest to protect a small urban park.

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### **Introduction**

Urban parks are a limited resource. They have become increasingly important to the urban landscape since there is an increase in demand for park spaces in cities. Today, new parks are not constructed as often as new buildings. Citizens are left using old park systems that are over-utilized and inconveniently located. Hence, individuals are limited in their choice of recreational spaces, and what parks that are available are needed to preserve the elements of history, scenery, or natural environments for people to enjoy. The relative shortage of open space and recreational facilities in metropolitan areas has created a shortage of good quality parkland. Parks offer an escape from the hustle and bustle of busy city streets. For example, parks supply a place where people can congregate to socialize or relax and may be used for exercise or as a place to read. Green spaces put people in a calmer mood and can also help to make the air a little cleaner. Therefore, all cities should have specific areas of open space set aside for the benefit of people.

Today there is an increasing awareness that preservation efforts are needed in order to keep our national, state, and local parks as protected areas that must be viewed as part of the surrounding ecological and cultural landscapes. Local community groups, such as the Friends of Grandmothers' Garden, Inc. in Westfield Massachusetts join the ranks of volunteer-based groups who dedicate their free time to preserve and manage public open spaces. And due to a growing disparity between location and condition, America's vast inventories of public parks are at forefront

of public consciousness and political agendas (Cranz, 1982; Garvin, 2000; Russell, 1996; Vaughn, 2000; Wright, 1996).

Many groups of people run to the outdoors on weekends to escape the congestion of crowds. People may try to escape the city to find "re-creation" of body and soul. Individuals achieve this in a variety of ways ranging from simply enjoying the scent of woodland, listening to the sounds of nature, or by just lying around (Johnson, 1972).

In this paper, a brief history of urban park resources will be provided. The reader will find a literature review followed by a case study of a small urban park. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of urban parks' role in modern society.

### **History of Urban Parks**

In the following section, the history of urban park resources will be introduced. It begins by introducing the ideas and concepts that gave rise to the construction of the park systems in North America. Next, the three key individuals responsible for starting this park movement in America will be identified.

Parks and outdoor recreation have had a long and complex history of overlapping ideas and concepts. Three different concepts of parks are realized from studies tracing from the beginning of the park and recreation movement. These are:

- Concerned conservationists wanted to preserve forestry, wildlife, and related natural resources. The concept of park usage resulted in federal and state legislation to help conserve and protect some of these resources.
- Park planning and design.
- Organized recreation, which gathered momentum at the turn of the twentieth century. (Johnson, 1972)

The conservation of natural resources was the beginning of the recreational use of our land. The recreation and playground movement resulted from a growing need to organize, schedule and give meaning to the activities taking place in the newly established parks, activity centers, and open space areas (Johnson, 1972). More recently, Williams (1995) traced the evolution of urban parks in three phases: Foundation, Consolidation, and Expansion. In the Foundation Phase during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, British planners saw urban parks grow in numbers. For the Consolidation Phase, more specialized urban recreation opportunities were promoted. And the Expansion Phase was experienced in the post WWII period and brought greater diversity and opportunities to urban residents (Williams, 1995).

As a result of the increasing demands for recreation, parks were beginning to take form in early America. Three individuals in specific had a tremendous influence on the development of park spaces in America. These were Andrew Jackson Downing, Frederick Law Olmstead, and Calvert Vaux. Downing's designs of an informal landscape park, much like England's first public parks, were to later influence Olmstead and Vaux. Olmstead and Vaux

collaborated their efforts in the planning and design of New York City's Central Park. After Central Park, they remained partners in landscape architecture (Johnson, 1972).

It was Central Park that began the park movement for many cities in the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The planning, acquisition of land, and the development of Central Park in New York City were the first big milestones in the municipal park system of the nation (Garvin, 2000).

However, most new park construction had to wait until after the Depression and World War II. By the 1950s park construction started to boom (Cranz, 1982). Parks became numerous throughout the fabric of all cities. However, it was not until the 1960s that emphasis was placed on open space itself in cities. In the 1960s, parks protected for open space became a political issue. This was in response to the so-called urban-crisis and the resultant "escape from the city" out-migration (Cranz, 1982). "Paley Park in New York City is the epitome of open space mentality. This small oasis offers a visual counterpoint to the city without escaping the adjacent street" (Cranz, 1982, p. 136). By the 1970s, emphasis of urban parks took on a moral imperative. "Park and recreation people must begin to take seriously their obligations to provide recreation experiences" (Brauer, 1972, p. 14). Fueled perhaps by the entire environmental movement following Earth Day, citizens began to recognize outdoor spaces were vital to the Earth's well-being. Therefore, in the late 1970s, municipal, regional, and federal agencies cooperated to preserve segments of historic towns and landscapes. For example, Lowell, Massachusetts is one example where a National Historic Park was founded (<http://www.nps.gov/lowe/>). These urban/cultural parks opened on the assumption that all parts of the city had equal aesthetic and recreational potential. "Diverse urban elements as historic sites and urban parks both serve as social gathering places" (Bray, 1978, p. 1).

More recently, Americans have experienced an explosion in urban greenways as a landscape planning tool (Little, 1990). While, the term greenway has only been around since the 1950s, the design of these open spaces has been in existence as early as 1860 due to Olmstead's goal to provide access to these open spaces to the residents that surrounded them. As Olmstead realized, greenways are a response to classic human needs and part of an evolving, centuries old landscape form (Fabos, Milde, & Weinmayr, 1968; Stearns, 1995).

#### Literature Review

The following literature review will provide summaries of the selected research materials in this area. Included here is a discussion of various benefits provided by parks. Observed positive benefits of urban parks include providing open space, psychological benefits, self-realization, escape mechanism, and therapeutic value. In fact, outdoor recreationists already realize many of these benefits. Outdoor recreationists are often those who

primarily seek psychological rewards, and wish to avoid negative elements of their daily living environment (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Driver, Brown & Peterson, 1991; Chubb, 1981). The Urban Parks Institute at Project for Public Spaces (<http://urbanparks.pps.org>) introduces the reader to a wealth of information on benefits.

Parks offer many benefits for the citizens and the community. One benefit that parks provide to city dwellers is open space. Open space may be utilized in many ways, including opportunities for recreation. While it may be obvious that recreation may provide one with physical benefits by engaging in sports and other activities, it also provides psychological benefits. From previous studies and observations, it appears that all forms of recreation have some sort of psychological significance, but the amount depends on the perception of the individual. These psychological aspects include relaxation, self-realization, escape mechanism, and therapeutic values.

Perhaps, the most important psychological benefit obtained from recreation is relaxation. The relaxation theory explains play as an activity that allows the individual to recuperate from fatigue and stress. When tired from work, people play. Opposite from the surplus energy notion, the relaxation theory claims that energy expended for survival activities is replenished during play (Vaughn, 2000). Relaxation provides a respite from life's worries and pressures relieves feelings of tension and fatigue and restores mental efficiency. Without relaxation, the human being would not be capable of functioning to the fullest potential.

In addition, recreation can provide valuable opportunities for self-realization by providing feelings of personal worth. The standard notion is personal enhancement and self-development is a developmental process of psychological growth and positive self-transformation. Leisure provides a distinctive life-space in which people can either cultivate preferred definition or creatively elaborate new self-definitions in the face of change. Examples may include: art activities that promote originality, participation in sports that result in feelings of exhilaration and accomplishment or by fulfilling personal goals which leads to feelings of self-improvement (Russell, 1996).

Escape Mechanism may also be achieved by offering temporary relief from unpleasant realities in a person's personal life. By immersing oneself in the make-believe world of daydreaming, and/or exercise that one often finds people doing in parks, one can recharge the emotional or physical strength they need to cope with what life deals them later (Chubb, 1981).

Urban parks are also known to provide a kind of healing therapy. Mandel (1998) suggests the value of recreation may help reduce pain, relieve anxiety, and strengthen the immune system. Improved physical conditioning and the release of endorphins can even remedy the brain. Endorphins are feel-good chemicals in the brain that are released when you do physical activity. Going outdoors and taking part in outdoor recreation helps manage stress

by relaxing the mind. This shows that the natural outdoors may play a positive role on the individual. Recent growth in the field of therapeutic recreation services and the recent demand in jobs provide evidence in the importance of this benefit. Visit the National Therapeutic Recreation Society at <http://activeparks.org/branches/ntrs/> for more information.

Citizens understand instinctively that a park's calming effect is as necessary as ever. Humans need open space just for social fabric, just as for mental well-being (Mandel, 1998). These patches of green stitched into the urban fabric form our playgrounds, our escapes from the gritty streets, bland shopping centers and blank office towers. A contemporary park is a place where you do not have to buy anything. Park planners ponder questions that most of us never consider such as: what exactly is "open space," and how is it important to our cities and our daily lives? Park experimentation has flourished in recent years, resulting in a series of innovative, expressive and often unexpected new landscapes in our cities. Designers are still trying to offer relief from the crowded city, but they are also struggling to shed the weight of park history (Vaughn, 2000).

To give an example of how park experimentation has shaped contemporary parks, consider the Tennessee River Park. It is a series of unique public parks connected by a twenty-two mile winding greenway along the river. This park brings together Chattanooga's citizens, public spaces, and scenic beauty. It is a very popular place for recreation. It offers a vast array of activities including rowing, viewing wildlife, a climbing wall, biking paths, fishing, walking, rollerblading and learning (the walk incorporates history). It also has an aquarium, sculptures throughout, wetlands, and many flowers. Each development has raised the bar on the design standards of the city's built environment and offered a rediscovery of the natural world (Vaughn, 2000). In essence, each place has its own unique character.

#### Case Study: Grandmother's Garden in Westfield, Massachusetts

Albert Steiger, a successful businessman, donated a 10-acre parcel of landscaped land that he acquired from his father-in-law Chauncey Allen, to the city of Westfield in the late 1920's (Wellington, 2000). This donation was given with a wish that one part of the lot would be made into a flower garden with old-fashioned flowers in dedication of his mother, "Grandmother Steiger". The town's people of Westfield came together and developed the parcel into a beautiful parcel of land. Steiger himself was moved by the completion of the garden now named "Grandmother's Garden". The garden flourished with the never-ending efforts of many hard working citizens. After the completion of Grandmother's Garden (GG), work started on a picturesque park that included a wading pool, frog pond, bandstand, and upper terrace that all overlooked GG and was named "Chauncey Allen Park". A map of available open space in the community is shown in Figure 1.

Grandmother's Garden has seen its share of ups and downs. In 1934, it was featured in a horticulture and landscape architectural magazine for winning a blue ribbon. However, in

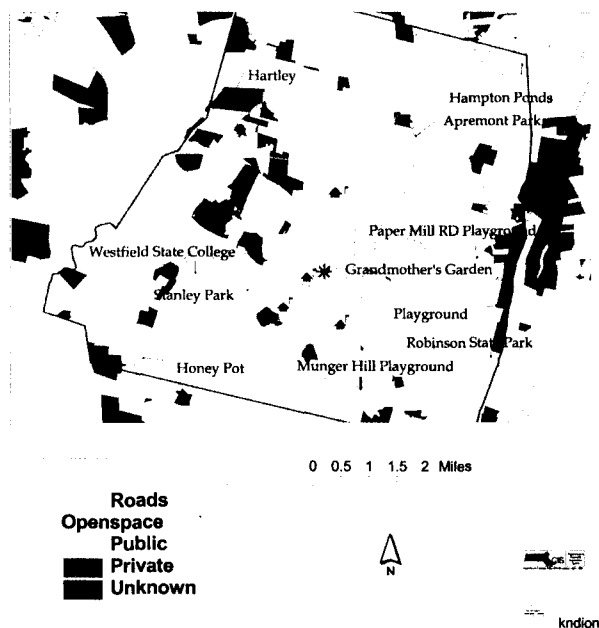


Figure 1. Open Space in Westfield, MA

the late 1970s money and volunteers were hard to come by and by 1994 the garden had to be closed due to the lack of both. This was provided the seed to grow a group of volunteers who were concerned for the love and care of the garden. This group is known as the "Friends of Grandmother's Garden". This group cares and publicizes for the garden. They are in the midst of a re-birth of GG, by renovating the garden. They produce a web site, (<http://community.masslive.com/cc/GrandmothersGarden>), flyers, membership and volunteer programs, such as a Grandmothers' Day essay contest.

#### Discussion

Recreation is an important part of life that people enjoy through various activities. Recreation is used for exercise, rest and relaxation, stress relief, family togetherness, and a variety of other reasons. After one is done with working, eating, sleeping, he or she may look for something to occupy this leisure time. This leisure time may be fulfilled with by the use of public parkland. Playing catch, taking a walk, or simply sitting on a favorite park bench observing the natural beauty of the landscape are ways park resources may be enjoyed. The value of parks and recreation may also arise by just looking forward to going to the park after a stressful and hectic day. Going to the park and doing an activity may result in stress relief, mental and physical revival, and a healthful state of mind. This in turn helps individuals continue with their busy lives by providing a renewed physical and mental capacity, which enables them to tackle whatever may be thrown their way. Therefore, parks are a most vital component of urban landscapes. Individuals need open space provided so they are not denied the necessity of recreation space as both a physical and mental supplement to overall well-being.

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