The American public space

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Those of us old enough to remember what America was like a half century ago have lived through a significant but largely unnoticed development in our landscape. By that I mean not the growth of our cities but a development that came about largely as a consequence of that growth: the great increase in the number and variety of public places all over the nation.

A public place is commonly defined as a place (or space) created and maintained by public authority, accessible to all citizens for their use and enjoyment. This tells us nothing about the different ways in which we use and enjoy them, nor about the different types of public involved, but we have only to look about us to see that they are often outside the center of town and even in the open country. Many have an educational purpose: historic zones, outdoor museums, botanical gardens. And more and more spaces are being designed to give us a brief experience of nature: hiking trails and wilderness areas and beaches, for example. When we include among the newer public spaces the parking lot, the trash disposal area, and the highway, it is evident that the public is being well provided for, not only as far as places for enjoyment are concerned, but for their use as well.
Implicit in the word “public” is the presence of other people. We know better than to resent that presence; they have as much right to be there as we have. Just the same, it is characteristic of many modern public spaces that contact between persons is likely to be brief and noncommital. Indeed, when the public is too numerous we are made uncomfortable. We did not come here for what an earlier generation called “togetherness,” we came for an individual, private experience—a sequence of emotions, perceptions, sensations, of value to ourselves. This is not to say that we are unfriendly, merely that we do not necessarily associate every public place with social intercourse. We assume, in fact, that there are special places appropriate for that. Yet when we look for them today we find they are few.

Civic space

Much has changed in America since the time when every public space was intended to be the setting for some collective, civic action. I think it can be said that beginning in the eighteenth century every public space—every piece of land controlled by the authorities—was meant to serve a public institution rather than to serve the public as an aggregate of individuals. In the newer planned towns of New England an area of public land was set aside for the support of the local church and its preacher, though not for public use. Section 16 in the townships created by the National Land Survey of 1785—the only designated public space in the township—was to support a local school. Hence its name: school section, still a feature of the western landscape. Communities more urban in character recognized the need for public spaces that the public could use, but only for the benefit of the community at large. The newly created towns of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century almost invariably contained well-defined public places for the market, the drill field, the wharf, the “established” church, as well as places for a college or academy, and of course for public celebrations and public assembly. A civic function characterized them all; people were present in them to perform some public service or play some public role.

Public is a word without mystery: It derives from the Latin populus, and means belonging to or characteristic of the people. A public space is a people’s space. But “people” as a word is less obvious. With us it simply means humanity, or a random sample of humanity, but until well into the nineteenth century it meant a
specific group: sometimes the population of nation or a town, sometimes the lowest element in that population, but always an identifiable category. Thus a common phrase in England was "the nobility, the gentry, and the public." People in this sense implied an organization and a territory; and as an organization it had an organizing or form-giving authority.

Perhaps it can be said that, as a noun, "public" implied the population, or the people, while as an adjective it referred to the authorities. Thus a public building in the eighteenth century was not a place accessible to all, for their use and enjoyment, but was the working or meeting place of the authorities.

This strictly political meaning of the word helps us interpret the kind of public place or square found in most of the new towns and cities in colonial and post-colonial America. The invaluable collections of town plans in three books by John Reps show in some detail how early planners and promoters emphasized the importance of public places.¹ Each community, each town was given a grid plan or a variation on a grid, and though many of them were little more than a cluster of square blocks, invariably there was a symmetrical array of (proposed) public buildings on a piece of public land—courthouse, market, jail, etc.

It is interesting to see how faithful colonial and frontier America was to the early Renaissance practice of according more dignity to the building than to the square in front of it. Our own perception, of course, is the opposite: In our love of open spaces we see the building as "facing" the square, the square as the focal point in the urban composition. The eighteenth-century belief was that the square, however large and imposing, derived its dignity from its association with the building, and was in fact merely the place where the inhabitants gathered to pay homage to the authorities within. Many town maps indicate proposed smaller squares, inserted into what would eventually be built-up residential areas. These were undoubtedly meant to be surrounded and dignified by public buildings, as William Penn had proposed for the four minor squares in his plan for Philadelphia. It was only in the nineteenth century that these small squares were seen and treated as parks, and this change from concentrating on the public building to concentrating on the public space would eventually produce public

places bearing little or no aesthetic relationship to their urban surroundings.

Few of these neo-classical towns ever grew to resemble their paper prototypes. Many grew in an entirely unpredicted way: into monolithic compositions of identical blocks, as in Chicago, which are ideally suited to the purposes of the real estate speculator. Others did not grow at all. But their plans are no less interesting for that. They are diagrams, provincial and greatly simplified, of what Americans wanted in the way of towns: a rational, egalitarian, political ordering of spaces and structures, a sharp division between public and private, so that spaces for recreation or non-political, non-civic functions were left to the private sector to provide as best it could. The only truly public, or people's, space was the large central public square where all qualified citizens came together: a vast architectural roofless room, a stage, where all acted out their familiar assigned roles. And this, I think, is what really distinguished the traditional public space from our contemporary public space. Two centuries ago, despite the Revolution, it was still widely believed that we were already citizens (to the extent that we could qualify) when we appeared in public. We knew our role, our rank and place, and the structured space surrounding us merely served to confirm our status. (Much as in certain denominations we are members of the community of Christians from the moment of baptism; our subsequent participation in certain rites within the church simply confirms our permanent religious status.) But now we believe the contrary—that we become citizens by certain experiences, private as well as public. Our variety of new specialized public spaces are by way of being places where we prepare ourselves—physically, socially, and even vocationally—for the role of citizen.

Decline of the square

There are still many among us who hold that our public spaces should perform the same civilizing, political role. Nevertheless, as the nineteenth century progressed it became evident that the public square was losing prestige. During the Revolution the centers of popular excitement had been Faneuil Hall, Independence Hall, and the New York Common. But when political oratory and political demonstrations went out of fashion, the public began to frequent the busier streets, the tree-lined promenades, and the waterfront. Other developments gave the centrifugal movement further impetus. Middle-class families felt the attraction of the suburbs or
of the independent homestead. Newcomers, many from overseas, had no sentiment for the established customs, and in newer parts of town evangelical churches competed with the established church in the center. The coming of the railroad and the factory and the mill shifted leisure time activities to the less built-up outskirts of town; and finally the public buildings themselves ceased to be the locus of real power, and gradually became office buildings for the bureaucracy. In almost every American town the traits Sam Bass Warner has identified with mid-nineteenth century Philadelphia became more and more prevalent:

The effect of three decades of a building boom... was a city without squares of shops and public buildings, a city without gathering places which might have assisted in focussing the daily activities of neighborhoods. Instead of subcenters the process of building had created acres and acres of amorphous tracts—the architectural hallmark of the nineteenth and twentieth century American big city... Whatever community life there was to flourish from now on would have to flourish despite the physical form of the city, not because of it.²

Though the older towns and cities of the East retained their tradition of central park spaces, towns laid out in the Midwest and throughout the Great Plains were predominately grid plans of uniform blocks. Some of them, judging from Reps's Cities of the American West, provided for one or two “public squares” or “public grounds,” yet few of these were centrally located and it is hard to find any of them associated with a public building. In many cases the larger spaces set aside for parks were soon subdivided into building lots. No doubt the reluctance to plan for public spaces in the potentially valuable downtown can be ascribed to the proprietor’s eagerness to make money in downtown real estate. But by cutting straight through the average small American town and establishing its station and freightyards near main street, the railroad transformed the traditional center in ways that the railroad in Europe was never allowed to do: There the station was exiled to the outskirts. Thus the American town very early in the game developed a substitute social center (for men only) around the station and freightyards—a combination skidrow, wholesale district, and horse transportation complex that seems to have offered a variety of illicit and lower class attractions, as well as being a center for news. But this was a poor substitute for the traditional urban space where citizens could forgather and talk, a place described by the

anthropologist R. Baumann "as special, isolated from others and enjoyed for its own sake, because talking there may be enjoyed for its own sake and not as part of another activity or for some special instrumental purpose." And so strong was the urge to have such places easily accessible yet detached from the workaday world that the American urban public, or a fraction of it, soon discovered a new and agreeable space on the outskirts of town—a favorite spot for relaxation and sociability. That was the cemetery.

The recreational cemetery

The story of the development of the so-called rural cemetery in America is familiar to anyone who knows our urban history. It began in 1831 with the designing of Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a picturesque landscape of wooded hills, winding roads with paths, and rustic compositions of lawn and stream with pleasant views over the Charles, all in the style of the landscaped gardens fashionable in England at that time. This new type of cemetery immediately became a popular goal of excursions from the city. To quote Norman Newton’s account, Mt. Auburn "soon became very popular as a quiet place in which to escape the bustle and clangor of the city—for strolling, for solitude, and even for family picnics. Following its success other cemeteries of the same type began to spring up."³

These rural cemeteries, usually located within easy reach of the city, attracted thousands of pleasure-seeking visitors, both before the presence of graves and tomb-stones, and after. Downing estimated that more than 50,000 persons visited Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn in the course of nine months in 1848. They came on foot and in carriages. Guidebooks in hand, they admired the monuments and the artistic planting and the views. They wandered along the lanes and paths, and rested on the expanses of lawn, sketched, ate lunch, and even practiced a little shooting. They had discovered a kind of recreation that the city had never offered.

The generally-accepted explanation for the popularity of the rural or picturesque cemetery is that it satisfied the new romantic love of nature. No doubt this had something to do with the enthusiasm, but the existence of widespread nature romanticism among working class Americans—or indeed among working class Europeans—has yet to be established. What evidence we have is largely

literary, and like our contemporary environmentalism, nature romanticism seems to have been essentially a middle-class movement. In the writings of A.J. Downing, one of the most influential exponents of romanticism in architecture and landscape architecture, there are frequent suggestions that a taste for the romantic was peculiar to persons of refinement and wealth. In fact we now know enough about the fashion to recognize that a carefully-designed and well-executed picturesque landscape park called for considerable skill. It was not a “natural” space, it was (in the hands of the artist-designer) a highly structured space, a “painterly” composition whose rules and techniques were inspired by established landscape painters. It was Olmsted who best understood the canons of the picturesque and who applied them on a grandiose scale in Central Park and Prospect Park. To the average urban working-class American, relaxing in a rural cemetery, the appeal of the new landscape was quite different from that of Downing’s well-to-do patrons. He was less aware of the subtleties of romantic composition, or even of the possibility of a direct contact with nature, than of the apparent lack of structure. The informal landscape offered the delights of spontaneous contact with other people in a setting that in no way prescribed a certain dress code or a certain code of manners. It was a public space of a novel kind: full of surprises, where emotions and pleasures were fresh and easily shared. It was not simply another artificial space; it was an environment, a place for new, primarily social, experiences. It represented the rejection of structure, the rejection of classical urbanism with its historical allusions, and the rejection of architectural public space.

As further evidence that nature romanticism had little or nothing to do with the acceptance of the rural cemetery, we might consider another, less familiar example of the popular American preference for unstructured public places: the camp meetings or revivals, the evangelical gatherings which were numerous in rural and frontier communities through the first half of the nineteenth century. Each of them attracted hundreds of men and women and children, black as well as white, and each lasted several nights and days. Almost always they had a forest background. Yet despite the wilderness setting and the prevailing emotionalism, it would be hard to find any trace of nature awareness in the proceedings, nor in their religious experiences. On the contrary: The forest seemed to free men and women from any environmental influences. Again, it was the lack of structure, the lack of behavioral design that produced the exhilaration.
Olmsted’s isolated art-works

The park movement did not evolve out of the Great Revival, but out of the rural cemetery. It was a remarkable instance of how quickly and effectively Americans can respond to a humanitarian need—in this case the need for agreeable, healthy, and beautiful places where the urban population could enjoy itself and (of course) have contact with nature. In 1851 the New York legislature authorized the city to acquire some 840 acres for a public park. Seven years later Frederick Law Olmsted had won the design competition and work had begun on Central Park.

Ten years after that, despite the intervening war, there was not a major American city without a rural park, or the prospect of one, and many of those parks had been designed by Olmsted and his associates. Though at the beginning there were expressions of disapproval—the park would be taken over by rowdies, it was too large, it lacked the more formal qualities of the European royal parks—it was not long before parks in general were accepted as invaluable from the point of view of health, of innocent recreation, and as antidotes for the crowded and filthy city slums. Innumerable rural parks were created in smaller towns, and in the new towns of the West. It would be impossible to identify the number of college campuses, courthouses and institutional landscape designs, to say nothing of the landscaped cemeteries, that helped beautify communities throughout the country. Few of these spaces were designed by professionals. Most were the work of local amateur gardeners, and the transformation of many New England commons into neat little parks was frequently done by local women’s organizations. For the most part these smaller, unpublicized parks were of no great artistic worth. They had their small lakes, their bandstands, their pretzel paths, and a monotony of elms or cottonwoods, but it must be said that they kept alive the civic tradition of public spaces at a time when the great Olmsted parks were fighting it. In those provincial parks political orators addressed the voters, band concerts were given, ethnic pageants were organized, and patriotic flowerbeds were admired. In the 1890s Frank Waugh, the landscape architect, described the typical western park as containing “race tracks, baseball grounds, camp meeting stands, carp ponds, fountains or fences.”

It was this indiscriminate mixture of uses that horrified the readers of Garden and Forest, the organ of the Olmsted school of landscape design. For by the end of the century there had developed a very self-assured set of standards for the design of rural parks, and
the most fundamental rule was that the "primary purpose of a rural park within reach of a great city is to furnish that rest and refreshment of mind and body which come from the tranquilizing influence of contact with natural scenery." This implied two restrictions: First, no building of any kind was to be erected in the park, nor (in the words of Olmsted's son John) "formal gardens, statuary, conservatories, botanical or zoological gardens, concert groves, electric fountains or the like; also popular athletic grounds, parade grounds, ball grounds for boys and facilities for boating and bathing." These installations were not themselves objectionable, and could well have been harmonized with "contact with nature." But the park was not nature, or a "natural environment." It was scenery, a whole landscape where the visitor could wander for hours over meadows and through woods and next to lakes and streams. For such was Olmsted's ideal: The park as a three-dimensional work of art. This in turn meant that the park should be visibly isolated from the surrounding city, enclosed by an impenetrable wall of greenery, so that the outside urban world would never impinge on the "rural" landscape, or on the experience of those visitors seeking rest and "refreshment of mind and body."

**Oxygen and virtue**

On aesthetic as well as on demographic grounds, there were reasons for this uncompromising isolation. But remoteness also promoted what Downing, Olmsted, and others had always considered the true role of the rural park: the physical and moral regeneration of the individual visitor. From the very beginning of the park movement there had been frequent references to the elevating influence that the rural park would have. "No one who has closely observed the conduct of the people who visit the park," Olmsted wrote, "can doubt it exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and lawless classes of the city—an influence favorable to courtesy, self-control and temperance." To supplement this influence, Olmsted created a special park police force to control misconduct, including walking on the grass. But he also relied on the force of example to give the poor "an education to refinement and taste and the mental and moral capital of gentlemen." This was to come from observing and emulating the manners and behavior of upper-class visitors to the park. As Thomas Bender notes, "Olmsted's generation saw no difficulty in recommending that Central Park, their symbol of the democratic com-
munity, be surrounded by elegant private villas that would exert an elevating influence upon the masses who visited the park."^4

The early vision of the rural park and its function survived intact for no more than fifty years. One of its original objectives had been the improvement of the health of city dwellers. But medical science soon proved that this was not simply a matter of fresh air and contact with nature; it was a matter of training, and the park was the appropriate place for such training. "Foul air prompts vice," said a New York physician, "and oxygen to virtue as surely as the sunlight paints the flowers of our garden. . . . The varied opportunities of a park would educate [the slum child] and his family in the enjoyment of open-air pleasures. Deprived of these, he and his are educated into the ways of disease and vice by the character of their surroundings."

In the 1880s the well-organized playground movement, which had started by providing small playgrounds in the slums, demanded access to the park, and at much the same time a public eager for places to play various outdoor games brought pressure on the city to provide appropriate space. "It was easier to persuade the city fathers to make use of existing parks than to purchase additional land for recreation. . . . In some cases the introduction of recreational facilities was achieved with intelligence and in conformity with the original park design. In other instances the results were detrimental to the former park purpose."^5

At the time of Olmsted's death in 1903 the park had largely ceased to be an environment in which the individual could enjoy solitary contact with nature, and had become an environment dedicated to guidance in recreation, health, citizenship, and nature knowledge. It was often crowded with cultural and recreational facilities, group activities, and increasingly populated by professional recreationists, playground supervisors, and leadership counselors. Even the definition of the park underwent drastic revision: It is now described in official documents as an open space, containing public facilities and with the appearance of a natural landscape. It is merely one element in a nation-wide ecosystem.

The landscape of diversity

In retrospect, how unpredictable and how extraordinary was the


^5 George Butler, "Change in the City Parks," *Landscape* 8 (Winter 1958-59).
change over a period of less than a century in the American concept of public spaces! The neo-classical square, in part surrounded by public buildings, and located in the heart of the city, had been the symbol of political status, recognized by all. In the 1860s, however, the rural park began to replace it in the public perception, and the rural park not only rejected any contact with architecture and formal urbanism, but was located as far as possible from workaday activities, as if to say: Here is the true center, the place where nature establishes the laws.

But perhaps the most dramatic contrast between the two public spaces was in their respective definitions of community. The neo-classical square implied a body of people, politically and socially homogeneous, inhabiting a well-defined political territory with clear-cut class divisions. The visitors to the rural park came singly, each in pursuit of an individual contact with nature, a private experience. The ideal romantic community was the garden suburb, where reverence for the environment was the only common bond, and anything like an urban or political center was discouraged. Where can such a center be seen in Olmsted's design for Riverside, the Chicago suburb? It is a pleasant tangle of curving roads and lanes where all residences are isolated by greenery. Community did not mean homogeneity or uniformity, it meant diversity, and nothing was more gratifying to Olmsted than to see a diverse public in Central Park. Again and again he described "the persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile." But this was a diversity of individuals. When the various recreational activities invaded the park in the 1880s, what ensued was a diversity of groups: age groups, ethnic groups, sports groups, neighborhood groups. That was quite another kind of diversity, and the spaces occupied by these groups, if only temporarily, constituted so many public places in the strictest sense: places where like-minded people came together to share an identity.

The emergence of these hitherto non-existent groups was probably the greatest contribution of the rural park. Long after the old-fashioned solitary pursuit of the contact with nature had vanished from the scene, these miniature societies with special identities continued to flourish and to acquire increasing public recognition over the years. Eventually they expanded beyond the park, and I think it was the automobile that encouraged this dispersal.

Though it is common practice to blame the automobile for having destroyed many territorial communities—particularly rural ones—the car has made it possible for us to come together over great
distances and in a shorter length of time than ever before, and this in turn has made possible the creation of many new and different public spaces throughout the landscape. Without the automobile countless recreational areas, monuments, national parks, to say nothing of remoter sections of our cities, would never have become part of those experiences which Americans always pursue. Quite aside from what they teach us, they serve as way-stations, as it were, in our American, essentially Protestant, pilgrimage of self-perfection through endless education.

We do well to encourage the creation of all such spaces combining recreation with knowledge of nature and of our past. Their popularity is their best reason for existing. Yet many of us are aware that another, no less important public space, the one where we seek out and enjoy the company and stimulation of others, has been much neglected. We have outgrown the classical monumental square with its political overtones. We now seldom congregate as citizens, and when we do, it is more to protest than to celebrate our collective identity. We have learned from experience that such oversize public spaces—and I would certainly include the Olmsted style park with its oversize natural landscapes—eventually can be subverted by the authorities and used to indoctrinate us with some establishment philosophy: the Wonders of Nature, the Wonders of Art, the Wonders of Physical Fitness, or the supreme Wonders of the Commissars looking down at us from their podium. Small, more intimate, less structured spaces are what we now prefer. “This loss of the natural impulse to monumentality,” John Summerson observed, “should not be a matter of regret. It is a perfectly natural reflection of the change which is taking place in the whole character of western culture. All those things which suggested and supported monumentality are in dissolution. The corporate or social importance of religion was one of them. The sense of the dominance of a class—of the exclusive possession of certain privileges by certain groups—was another.”

To these things supporting monumentality in the past must be added the concept of a monolithic Public, the concept of a homogeneous People. For the public now is a composition of constantly shifting, overlapping groups—ethnic groups, social groups, age groups, special interest groups—and each of them, at one time or another, needs its own space, distinct from the surrounding urban fabric, where its own special social forms, its own special lan-

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guage and set of relations, can flourish, a space which confers a brief visibility on the group. We have too few of these spaces today, too few resembling the Prado in the North End of Boston, or the ad hoc open air social spaces which often evolve in urban ethnic or racial neighborhoods and do so much to maintain a sense of local identity and custom. With great taste and infinite goodwill, landscape architects have designed many mini-parks to relieve the monotony of our towns and cities. But the Olmsted tradition persists, and what we all too often have are overelaborate spaces with the inevitable display of vegetation, the inevitable ingenious fountain, and the inevitable emphasis on individual isolation. Yet contact with other people, not contact with nature, is what most of us are really after.

A return to the street

Despite our current admiration for the formal square as a feature of the urban scene, despite our attempts to introduce it in our residential areas and shopping centers and in urban renewal projects, the time is approaching, I suspect, when we will turn our attention elsewhere. There are in fact many signs that the street, or a given fragment of the street, will be the true public space of the future. If in fact this is the case, we will be reverting, unconsciously of course, to a medieval urban concept which long preceded the Renaissance concept of the public square. In the Middle Ages it was the street—tortuous, dirty, crowded—and not the public space identified with the church or castle or market, that was the center of economic and social life. The street was the place of work, the place of buying and selling, the place of meeting and negotiating, and the scene of the important religious and civic ceremonies and processions.

But its most significant trait was its blending of domestic and public life, its interplay of two distinct kinds of space. The narrow, overcrowded buildings bordering it spilled over into the street and transformed it into a place of workshops, kitchens, and merchandising, into a place of leisure and sociability, and confrontation of every kind. It was this confusion of functions, the confusion of two different realms of law and custom, that made the medieval street a kind of city within a city, and the scene of innovations in policing, maintenance, and social reform. Until the eighteenth century the street was actually something far more extensive than the travelled space between the houses. It was the matrix of a community, al-
ways alive to threats of intrusion, jealous of privileges and customs, and conscious of its own unique character.

For many economic, social, and aesthetic reasons, we are now beginning to think of the street and its relation to its inhabitants in a way that recalls the medieval concept. Robert Gutman wrote:

The revival of interest in the urban street has been accompanied by a wholly new emphasis in the view of the street’s primary social function. Put simply, what sets the contemporary idea apart from previous definitions is the conviction that the street should be designed and managed for the benefit of its residents... These impulses to make the street work, to make it into a community, some of which are specific to the situation of the city today, have gained strength because... the residents of urban streets until recently regarded themselves as a relatively homogeneous population. This important point is often overlooked. We are concerned about the street community in large part because for the very first time in the history of cities the simple virtues and joys of urban life have been diminished for all social groups; and we connect this reduction in our level of satisfaction and safety with the breakdown of the community.7

Not every street can be defined as an essential spatial element in a community. The majority will continue to be public utilities. But insofar as certain streets will be seen as public places, as being closely related to their immediate built environment, they will be playing the social role we have long associated with the traditional public square: the place where we exhibit our permanent identity as members of the community. The learning experience, the experience of contact with new sensations, new people, new ideas belongs elsewhere. The street as the public space of a community, modest in size, simple in structure, will serve a strictly traditional purpose. It will be where, in the words of Paul Weiss, we recognize and abide by “a mosaic of accepted customs, conventions, habitual ways of evaluating, responding, and acting... men must, to be perfected, become social beings. They must act to make the structure of the group an integral part of themselves and a desirable link with others.”

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