

Book Review¹

The Politics of Park Design. Galen Cranz. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1981.

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Across the last 150 years parks have become a requisite feature of the urban landscape. Most universities offer coursework in park design and management, national organizations and lobbying efforts are engineered to increase parks' stature, and hundreds of thousands of employees tend these parks nationwide. Although parks existence is now largely taken for granted, Galen Cranz's *The Politics of Park Design* is the only book that has addressed the rationale and evolution of parks in American cities.

Tasked with designing neighborhood playgrounds in Chicago, Galen Cranz wanted her designs to reflect the purpose and goals of parks. Cranz investigated what people and professionals felt were the purposes of parks and open space. The result of her social historical analysis is *The Politics of Park Design*. This classic text was written almost 30 years ago and remains the only comprehensive account of urban park development in the United States. The text is written as a narrative but is bolstered by extensive use of historical quotes, more than 90 photographic records of parks, and 82 pages of notes and references.

The Politics of Park Design is presented in two parts. The first half of the book describes the design and use of public parks in four eras. The second portion delves into the politics that set in motion each successive park movement. Taken together, readers understand the evolution of American parks and what this evolution reveals about the social problems and location of political power in American cities.

The first chapter places readers in the clogged, dirty streets of New York City in the 1850s. City dwellers' concerns for a loss of landscape and air quality together with their idealized view of country living provided the social conditions for the development of America's first parks. These parks, called Pleasure Grounds (1850-1900), were conceived as antidotes to urban life that would stimulate workers' minds with meadows and sunshine right in the city. Parks such as Central Park in New York City, Jackson Park in Chicago, and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco were developed during this era. Curved paths, natural landscaping and park boulevards encouraged walks and promenading. However, the sheer size of these venues meant that pleasure grounds were often located on the edges of cities and

¹ Editor note: From time to time, the Journal of Leisure Research will print reviews of books published in years past. Established scholars and new leisure studies students alike may find inspiration in these "classics." These works are too important to be forgotten.

beyond the reach of workers who lacked the time and transportation resources to access these pristine venues.

Cranz identified an observed increase in workers' free time as an impetus for the second era of park design. This era, The Reform Park era (1900-1930), sought to fill working class families' free time with purposeful recreation at smaller, inner city sites. The movement was spearheaded by social workers and grassroots play leaders who organized activities and games to teach ethics and citizenship. The Reform Park era coincided with the playground movement and channeled at risk youth out of streets and into neighborhood parks. These parks were designed for utility, not beauty, and offered swimming pools, playgrounds, sport courts and field houses.

In the third chapter Cranz describes a shift away from idealistic rationale for parks to a systems model of provision in the Recreation Facility era (1930-1965). This era was characterized by the integration of parks with community services such as day care, schools, and the local housing authority. While this systems approach led to citywide and parks master planning, Cranz noted that a shift to bureaucracy resulted in fewer services focused on the park user and his/her welfare but instead, "...the park department took on a life of its own and came to be committed first of all to its own maintenance and enhancement" (p. 109). The author cites unemployment following the Great Depression, patriotism for foreign wars, and later, the development and growth of suburbs as factors that drove demand for development. In contrast to previous eras, these activities occurred not at parks, but at "recreation facilities." Adoption of the term recreation facility mirrors the increased attention given to pools, sports stadiums and field houses in preference to green spaces.

The fourth era, The Open Space system, was thought to dominate from 1965 until the book's publication in 1981. As a reaction to the playgrounds, parkways, stadiums and parking lots of the Recreation Facility era, a movement for open space in urban eras was advocated as early as 1960. Pocket parks were created in vacant lots, campaigns were mounted to restore natural areas, and designers struggled to create spaces that offered both contrast from the city and allowed a natural flow with the city. Popular culture, politics and art exhibits were apparent in parks for the first time in this era, although Cranz notes that their inclusion was contested.

Since its publication more than 25 years ago, Cranz with co-author Boland (2004) has offered evidence that parks are transitioning to a Sustainable Park model. Although the history of urban parks indicates an initial attention to social problems, Cranz and Boland argue that parks are poised to address ecological problems. Their review of park design descriptions from 1982 through 2002 indicates the proportion of parks with sustainability characteristics increased significantly after 1991. Although no one park would have all of the features of a sustainable park, this era would be characterized by a focus on human health and environmental stewardship through the use of native plants, permeable surfaces and the provision of human and animal corridors.

Based on her historical analysis of urban park eras, Cranz's central thesis emerges in Chapters 5-8. She posits that changes in park design have reflected the

power structure and social pressures of American cities. This thesis is supported by her investigation of the powers that be (Chapter 5), the intended and actual beneficiaries of parks (Chapter 6), and the reported benefits of parks (Chapter 7).

With regard to the powers that be, private citizens with considerable social and economic power acted on idealistic motives (and real estate speculation) to initiate urban park provision. When land was accumulated adjacent to cities, a variety of paid professionals (e.g. social workers, recreation leaders) identified parks as resources to support their work. Power over parks was later handed off to paid community officials where it remains in park and recreation departments/districts. Cranz argues that as parks became bureaucratized, the stature of parks and spending for parks waned.

With respect to populations served, Pleasure Grounds were intended to neutralize class distinctions and elevate the tastes of lower classes. Reform parks targeted lower income and immigrant populations, but again ignored preferences of these groups and focused instead on activities that encouraged cultural assimilation. The Recreation Facility addressed the needs of suburban families. Lastly, the Open Space era witnessed a renewed effort to neutralize differences within parks. Instead of mitigating class differences which was one intended goal of the Pleasure Ground, Open Space parks tried to take a stand against racial discrimination and provide services for underprivileged racial minorities living in the inner cities. Despite these efforts, Cranz points out parks were and often remain racially divided. Further, although parks have and continue to identify populations in greatest need of services, the facilities have often failed women. Across all eras, park programming was predominantly male focused with women serving ancillary roles in family recreation.

Lastly, Cranz synthesizes the four park eras according to the benefits they claim to provide. She notes that park benefits have historically been conceptualized as beneficial outcomes that accrue to users, which in aggregate, may aid the community. This limited conceptualization of benefits ignores any intangible benefits that may be reaped at the community level. For example, the benefits of parks that have been touted to policy makers include public health (Pleasure Ground), improved morale (Reform Park), and economic stimulation (Recreation Facility). These benefits have coincided with crises in environmental health, foreign wars, and economic downturns. In other words, Cranz argues that parks' purposes have been too conveniently linked to temporal urban challenges—and not an enduring philosophical position. Moreover, she argues that these reactionary responses to society have been incomplete and slow. Cranz concludes, "The existing theory about the larger social purposes of parks...has been naïve and almost offhand" (p. 208). Indeed, visitation statistics have been the predominant measurements of park outcomes and these superficial reports have typically carried less weight than political demands and pressures from interested groups. In the end, Cranz brings readers full circle to her own starting place in neighborhood park design. "Lack of definition regarding park purposes is a particularly vexing problem to designers, administrators and citizens who have to make policy decisions about how to design, manage, and support parks" (p. 249).

Although *The Politics of Park Design* was published nearly thirty ago, it remains as relevant today as it did at its debut. Park lovers will enjoy understanding the layers of history that led to the indistinct and muddled design of their own neighborhood and community parks. The logic for a fitness par courses that circles the pastoral picnic area and stark brick basketball field house will become clear. More importantly, however, individuals considering a career in the public sector can gain insight into community politics. Cranz forces current park administrators to consider *what* parks can (and cannot) achieve, and *how* to meet these goals. One of the strengths of this text is Cranz's external vantage point for investigating parks. Trained as a sociologist, Cranz approaches parks with a critical eye and sharply focuses on weaknesses of the philosophy, empirical study of park outcomes, and micro-level focus evident in park development. In the absence of a strong compass guiding development and growth, politics have dictated park design. To reassert control for parks in American communities she challenges readers to conceive a realistic, long-term vision for American parks. This challenge is an important one for all modern park management students for whom this should be required reading. She observes that "As a rule, park departments are still saddled with a mental outlook that goes with their glory days as an all-purpose reform agency for society...They have not taken measure of their own decline" (p. 247). Despite these critiques, Cranz asserts that parks are a public good and are critical to community life. From her perspective, the contribution of parks may be in the democratization of urban spaces and support for ecological sustainability. Readers will be challenged to identify their own biases and assumptions about the purposes of parks. These considerations can open a dialogue on our responsibilities as park professionals and how to transition existing park spaces into purposeful venues.

References

- Cranz, G., & Boland, M. (2004). Defining the Sustainable Park: A fifth model for urban parks. *Landscape Journal*, 23(2), 102-120.