

**P**arks and plazas have long served as the common ground for socialization. Since the mid-19th century, the American model for urban parks has been based on the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect, city planner, and writer on social issues who was responsible for the creation of New York City's Central Park and who passed on an enduring belief that city parks would help to create a more civilized society by bringing together all of a city's diverse cohorts on a common ground.

However, in the last half of the 20th century, urban public space saw a variety of challenges—ranging from lack of funding to privatization—that have led to a reconsideration of both the concept of the public domain and the spaces themselves. After World War II, suburbanization and the decline of large urban centers took a toll on metropolitan parks. The lowest point occurred during the Reagan Administration, when cities no longer had monies allocated to the proper care of parks and other public open space—much less for the design of new projects. As the middle class fled from core urban areas to the suburbs, funding for the maintenance and security of urban parks disappeared.



JOSEPH POBERESKIN/STONE/GETTY IMAGES

# AFTER OLMSTED





Industrial relics and threatened urban parks are being reimagined as public places.

NANCY EGAN AND PAUL NAKAZAWA

By the late 1980s, a significant portion of urban public space—once an amenity for all classes—was left to deteriorate. Instead of spending money to improve parks, playgrounds, and plazas, cash-strapped cities opted for police protection. At the same time, disinvestment in traditional public places on the part of municipal governments created an opportunity for private interests to develop simulated public space in the form of downtown corporate plazas or self-described “town centers” that were essentially retail malls.

The renaissance of urban centers, fueled by a combination of demographic changes and global competition for talent, commerce, and employment, has revalued public space. Urban parks and plazas once again are being promoted as critical components of world-class cities—places where the physical shape and civic programs have been transformed by a global tide that has altered the economies of major American centers. Manufacturing, shipping, and other labor-intensive industries have moved out of the metropolis, settling in more cost-effective locations in the southern states or offshore. The finance, high-tech, and biotech businesses that replaced them demand improved infrastructure for a new class of highly educated

**Urban public space, for years modeled after New York City's Central Park (opposite page), which was designed by landscape architect/city planner Frederick Law Olmsted, is once again being promoted as a critical component of world-class cities, but the expectations of public space have changed, producing a new generation of urban parks and plazas, such as Barcelona's Parc Diagonal Mar (left).**



employees. As workplaces morph and urban neighborhoods gentrify, cities, for the first time in decades, must expand the public realm to accommodate a new vision of urban life for a different mix of stakeholders.

Former suburbanites, including young workers and empty nesters, are joining stalwart urbanites in a renewed demand for open space in the city. Although the new metropolitans want to enjoy the pleasures of urban parks as much as the Olmstedian citizens did, they have different expectations of public space based on values formed away from the gritty vitality of urban life. Suburban sensibilities vis-à-vis order, security, personal space, and social behavior often conflict with those of other stakeholders, including young people, diverse ethnic groups, and the urban poor.

What unites the disparate factions is their desire for accessible, usable open space that offers an alternative to the high-density hard-scape of the city. More and more, local citizens' organizations are speaking out, not just *against* proposed developments, but also *for* the kind of environments, amenities, and programs that they feel are their due. The challenge for government is how to respond to such demands without the support of strong parks departments, adequate funding, or easily adaptable sites.

The emerging combination of political will, private sector involvement, and innovative thinking is producing a new generation of urban parks, plazas, and other public places. Today, the means and results suggest evidence of an urban model in transition.

Urban cores are dense, land values within them are high, and the outer reaches of most U.S. cities are poorly served by public transit. Locations for new parks have been pushed to disused industrial districts—waterfronts, railyards, and other brownfield sites. "The retreat of the industrial glacier" is providing a promising alternative for urban parkland, points out Toronto-based urban planner Ken Greenberg. From the waterfronts of New York City and Seattle to the riverfronts of Detroit and Denver, more than land is being recycled as the industrial infrastructure is reinvented in the new landscapes. "We are no longer building the green lawns of passive parks," maintains Joe Brown, president and CEO of EDAA, headquartered in San Francisco. "We are creating smart parks that can become the hip, active centers of recreation and celebration as well as catalysts for economic investment."

A master plan for the new Brooklyn Bridge Park, located underneath the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges, involves the transformation of a nearly 67-acre industrial site stretching some 1.3 miles along the East River piers and waterfront. The plan, developed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc. (MVVA), of New York with Greenberg and with Hamilton, Rabinowitz & Alschuler of New York, involves unifying the long narrow site and mitigating the roar of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway while creating a financially self-sustaining park with a strong identity as a green landscape.



From the waterfronts of New York City to Seattle, more than land is being recycled as locations for new parks have been pushed to disused industrial districts where infrastructure is reinvented in the new landscapes. Brooklyn Bridge Park, located underneath the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges, involves the transformation of a nearly 67-acre industrial site stretching some 1.3 miles along the East River piers and waterfront into a financially self-sustaining park (above, top, and facing page). In Seattle, the city's largest and last undeveloped waterfront will accommodate the 8.5-acre Olympic Sculpture Park, a green space beyond the walls of the Seattle Art Museum (below).







MICHAEL VAN VALKENBERG ASSOCIATES, INC.



MICHAEL VAN VALKENBERG ASSOCIATES, INC.



WEISS/MANFREDI ARCHITECTS

According to Matthew Urbanski, principal of the New York office of MVVA, the process requires reviving the area's existing infrastructure for new uses. "The Brooklyn piers are modern, dating from the 1950s, and are roughly 200 to 300 feet wide. . . a sizable industrial footprint of about five acres that can be used. Because infrastructure is costly in every respect, whether repair or maintenance or removal [is involved], there's a structural economy in capturing the space. Also, the piers reach out and connect the park to the multiple thousand-acre ocean that is our borrowed landscape here," he says. Older finger piers such as those at another MVVA project, Pier Park in Hoboken, are in such disrepair that they are being rebuilt in a more playful form, notes Urbanski.

In Washington State, the Seattle Art Museum, in partnership with the Trust for Public Land, purchased downtown Seattle's largest and last undeveloped waterfront to accommodate an 8.5-acre sculpture park, which will involve transforming a former industrial site into new green space beyond the museum's walls. The design of the Olympic Sculpture Park by Weiss/Manfredi Architects of New York connects the city to open waterfront space, a continuous surface that unfolds as a landscape for art, linking three disparate sites currently separated by train tracks and roadways.

Other industrial relics are being reinvented as public places. For example, in New York City, the High Line, an elevated railroad spur, stretches 1.45 miles from the Jacob Javits Convention Center to the Gansevoort Street meatpacking district on the far western edge of Manhattan. Located two stories above the sidewalk, the concrete-and-steel structure—so much a part of the urban landscape that it had long gone unnoticed—is slated to be topped with a public park. A grass-roots organization, the Friends of the High Line, has been mobilizing support for several years and now Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, city council speaker Gifford Miller, and the city council as a whole have all publicly endorsed the idea of a public park on the railroad bed.

In Boston, where the Big Dig has entailed the dismantling of the Central Artery, municipal officials and the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority are involved in creating an urban parkway, the Rose Kennedy Greenway, in the shadow of the former elevated highway. (See page 58.) There also are designs for new parks that are in the final stages of development in the North End, the Wharf District, and Chinatown that connect these parks to the city's larger park and open-space system.

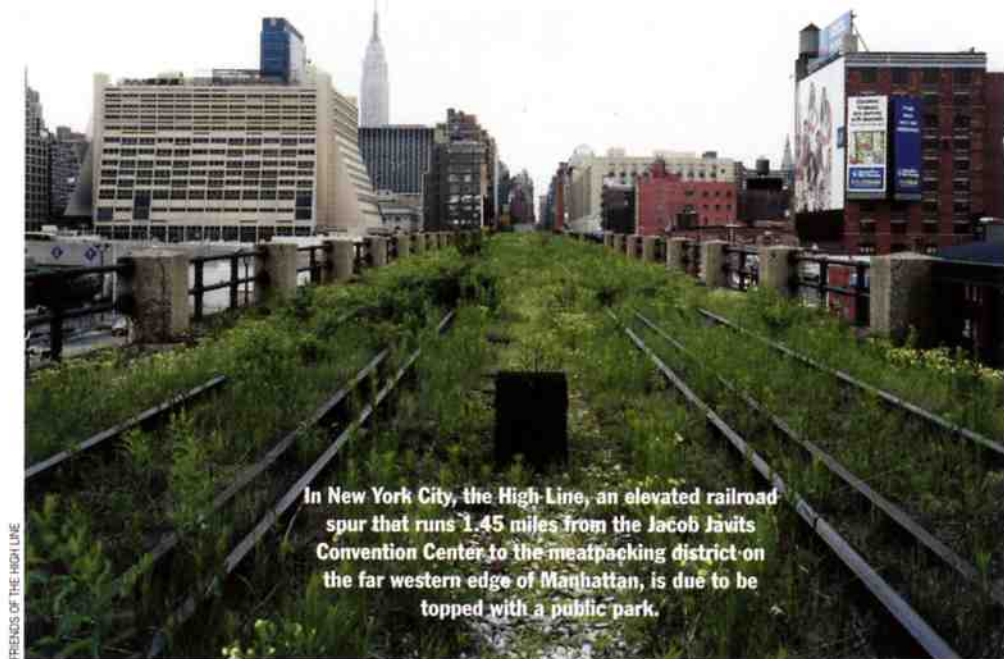
In Los Angeles, the Grand Avenue Project involves creating a recognizable downtown center for the sprawling metropolis. Building on the concentration of civic and cultural uses along, and adjacent to, Grand Avenue, it will include a mix of residential, retail, entertainment, and office projects to be developed concurrently on four prime parcels on Bunker Hill, along with a new 16-acre park, which will be a civic plaza that can be used for citywide events.



Complementing efforts to establish new parks on the skeletons of old transportation systems are others who are trying to rescue existing urban parks from the ravages of modern transportation, especially the car. In San Diego's Balboa Park, landscape architect and planner Mark Johnson, president of Denver-based Civitas, says, "Wear and tear and tension from the overlapping use of spaces—98 institutions in 23 buildings, including the zoo and the museums, attract 12.5 million visitors a year—is damaging what everyone loves." Johnson is part of a team that is studying how to reclaim parkland from parking lots with a series of parking structures, shuttles, and improved access and roadways.

The aforementioned projects, and dozens of others around the country, suggest a commitment to creating new and revitalized public spaces, not only on the part of communities, but also on the part of cities, states, and private institutions to provide such urban spaces, even in the current economy. Northeastern cities have become living laboratories for the reprogramming of these urban centers. For example, in New York, for the first time it is now possible to conceive of a green waterfront zone running entirely around Manhattan. As old uses fade away, the question becomes how to create new parkland and what amenities will attract users that also will allow the parks to be self-sustaining. "In this new era, the process has to expand," explains landscape architect and planner Van Valkenberg. "Our team for Brooklyn Bridge Park includes economic analysts working on income generation plus experts on the cost of maintaining the park, as well as climate engineers and consultants on leading-edge green concerns, all working together with the design team and the community. It is the new prototype," he adds.

In Boston, the combination of higher education, health care, and corporate research and development in the life sciences, especially around MIT and the Longwood Medical complex, represents an unprecedented spatial concentration of talent and capital. The city is also one where the political power of ethnic working-class neighborhoods is significant. Creating what Robert Brown, a principal with Boston-based CBT/Childs Bertman Tseckares Inc. and the Boston Society of Architects's representative to the Mayor's Task Force on the Central Artery Parks, sees as "not just green space but a place of common ground," requires both vision and a long view. "We are a much more diverse city than we were when the Common and the Gardens were planned," says Brown. "Part of our job is to create a framework that is large enough to encompass the program needs of the neighborhoods and the cultural rituals that are very local, and, at the same time, provide parks that are regional and long lasting in their appeal."



In New York City, the High Line, an elevated railroad spur that runs 1.45 miles from the Jacob Javits Convention Center to the meatpacking district on the far western edge of Manhattan, is due to be topped with a public park.

The process can become politicized quickly as diverse stakeholder groups lobby for *their* park, setting the stage for potential conflicts. Empty nesters who desire a pastoral, passive experience versus young parents whose kids need a playground versus teenagers who want performance space for urban sports like skateboarding all jockey for room in parklands less than one-tenth the size of the 840 acres in Central Park. Added to the fray is the development community, which sees a well-maintained, well-used, secure green space as a catalyst for nearby private development that will contribute substantially to the local economy—and there is considerable pressure brought to bear on civic leaders and their planners.

A well-articulated vision helps to keep conflictive uses in balance. "People are [eager] to participate in the success in their community," says Johnson. "We have to give them a clear focus, a future they can imagine. And it needs to be big. Incrementalism kills value." Perceived value, whether for users, the city government, the business community, or developers, is essential to bringing a project to life, he explains. "Money flows upward toward vision," quips Johnson, noting that this is particularly true when the private sector gets involved.

When the Seattle Art Museum decided to purchase the Union Oil of California site, for example, the institution put \$100 down and had but six months to raise \$16.5 million in private funds. Since then, both private donations and public funding, including monies from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Target Foundation, the King County Council and Arts Commission, the Seattle city council, and the federal government, have pushed the project forward. Well publicized, Olympic Sculpture Park captured the imagination of the citizens of Seattle, including the high-tech philanthropists whose companies have replaced the old industrial giants in the local economy.

The new Millennium Park in Chicago will add 16 acres of parkland to Grant Park. When efforts to raise private donations succeeded beyond expectations, city officials took the opportunity to

FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE



**"WE ARE NO LONGER BUILDING THE GREEN LAWNS OF PASSIVE PARKS.**

**WE ARE CREATING SMART PARKS**

**THAT CAN BECOME THE HIP, ACTIVE CENTERS OF**

**RECREATION AND CELEBRATION AS WELL AS**

**CATALYSTS FOR ECONOMIC INVESTMENT."**

add top-level amenities to the park, including a band shell designed by architect Frank Gehry, an outdoor sculpture by British artist Anish Kapoor, a pedestrian bridge, a music and dance theater, a public fountain, a year-round garden, a 300-seat restaurant accompanying the ice rink, and a replica of the Greek-columned peristyle. Private donors, including Chicago corporations Ameritech,

At San Diego's Balboa Park, efforts have focused on reclaiming parkland from parking lots with parking structures, shuttles, and improved access and roadways.



William Wrigley Jr. Company, and the Tribune Foundation, are now on track to raise more than \$100 million to pay for these additions.

While private funding can make a critical difference in the successful beginnings of new park projects, private sector involvement can blur the already tenuous line between public and private in the use of space. Some stakeholders have begun to question the publicness of public space, noting the increased use of exclusionary architectural details—such as antiskate metal clips called “pig ears”

or divots in park benches that discourage skating or sleeping—and security technology. For example, skateboarder and writer Ocean Howell in his essay, “The Poetics of Security: Skateboarding, Urban Design, and the New Public Space,” published in *Urban Action 2001*, a publication of the Urban Studies Program at San Francisco State University, sees a new approach to the design of public places where “publicness is perceived as privilege.” He makes a case against “stimulated public space, produced by surveillance, directed toward profit, and enforced by spikes and guards.”

The question of access becomes more complex as communities seek new ways to create parkland. Does the developer who builds on the edge of a public amenity have a voice in decisions about the park? What of the developer who provides park space or a public passage at the heart of a town center development; is it really public space? “Does it matter, as long as users perceive it as civic space?” asks Ronald Altoon, principal of Los Angeles-based Altoon + Porter Architects. “We have been designing projects with squares and courts and parks that give users a sense of entitlement. They’re based on a European model of piazzas and town squares surrounded by private shops and cafés and they attract a diverse audience of users.” Will they feel the same if they have to go through security to enter or pay for admission?

The questions remain unanswered as the experiment continues in cities across the country. What is promising is the variety of new voices, processes, and forms that both challenge and confirm Olmsted’s vision. A recent exhibit titled “Open, New Designs for Public Space” at New York’s Van Alen Institute: Projects in Public Places addressed the issue with a collection of projects as diverse as London’s City Hall; a memorial bridge in Rijeka, Croatia; and the Favela-Bairro Project in Rio de Janeiro accompanied by a catalog of essays by an eclectic group of urban thinkers. In their introduction, Raymond W. Gastil, the executive director of the institute, and Zoe Ryan, the curator of the exhibition, capture the caution and optimism of the municipal officials, community leaders, planners, and architects engaged in the creation and preservation of the public realm.

“This is the worst of times to downgrade our expectations for public life. From concerts in Central Park to protests on the Mall, to politics and performance in the streets and squares of six continents, public space is working,” write Gastil and Ryan. “Public spaces allow for shared experiences that can give rise to the mutual respect—however grudging—that is the basis of a thriving metropolitan culture. It may not be the best of times for public space, but it is a compelling era.” ■

**NANCY EGAN** HEADS NEW VOODOO, A CONSULTING PRACTICE THAT PROVIDES IMAGE/CONTENT DEVELOPMENT TO THE REAL ESTATE AND DESIGN COMMUNITIES FROM OFFICES IN SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA, AND CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS. **PAUL NAKAZAWA**, A BOSTON-BASED ARCHITECT, HEADS NAKAZAWA CONSULTING AND IS A BUSINESS STRATEGIST AND EDUCATOR.