

All things to all People : A brief history of Parks and Open Spaces

The title of this paper was a comment from a manager on parks, probably in both pride and exasperation. Parks and open spaces are again being recognised as an important element in people's quality of life. It is also becoming increasingly accepted that they contribute to the sustainability of our towns and cities. It is essential that this re-found focus is neither lost again, nor used as an excuse to turn parks into late Victorian / early 20th century heritage features, but that it leads to a dynamic reappraisal of the place of parks in the 21st century.

Open spaces in towns and cities are as old as cities themselves. They have ranged from the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to ancient London's marshes and to the lavish formal gardens of Paris and Vienna. Victorian Britain saw the rise of the municipal park, and 20th Century Britain witnessed its decline. Some key factors were:

* In overcrowded Victorian cities parks were seen as a way of improving health and reducing discontent,¹ and were provided by the new municipalities and rich philanthropists.

* Ebenezer Howard's town planning ideas at the start of the 20th century, exemplified by the Garden City Movement which set out to create attractive towns through well designed open space.

* The concern in the 1930s and 40s for the physical and moral welfare of the young, and the need to make them "fit to fight", shifted the emphasis to recreation and sports grounds. Sports pitches produced bleak landscapes: they are undoubtedly open space but are more about quantity than quality.

* The Second World War which saw many parks being ploughed for growing food.

* A brief period of post-war renovation during the 1950s, peaking in the mid 1960s.

* From then hard-pressed councils gradually withdrew staff and other resources. Changing patterns of social life left parks empty, whilst neglect, decay, and anti-social behaviour from a small minority reinforced the impression that parks should be avoided rather than visited. Many familiar features were lost (Handley ²).

* Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in the 1980's changed councils from providers to facilitators, with many parks being managed by contractors. A by-product was to give senior managers other responsibilities in addition to parks, meaning that there is no longer a career path linked directly to parks management alone.

Parks and open spaces provision is a classic example of the public finance problem of knowing, defining and managing costs without being able to assess and define values. By the late 1980s it was recognised that there was a problem. This led to a number of research projects, and policy and other initiatives. These included the following.

1 The Morphet Report (1989)³

An unpublished study on urban open spaces undertaken by Birmingham Polytechnic for the Inner Cities Directorate of the then Department of the Environment. Important observations include:

- a) Over emphasis on open space hierarchies has tended to give priority to large edge of city sites at the expense of small inner city sites.
- b) There is no nationally adopted absolute standard of open space.

¹ Hansard July 14 1835 Speech by Richard Slaney MP for Shrewsbury

² Handley, J., and Bulmer, P. 1986 (Draft) *Making the Most of Greenspace*. Report by St. Helens Groundwork Trust to Department of the Environment (Contract PECD7/2/U13-1/83)

³ Morphet, J. Unpublished study by Birmingham University for Department of the Environment. 1989

- c) The quality of open space is of more concern to its users than its quantity.
- d) Users give high priority to the visible presence of management..

3 London Planning Advisory Committee 1992⁴. Open Space Planning in London

This report argued for further banding (from that used in the Greater London Development Plan) of the types of publicly accessible open space relating to the size of the catchment area.

Band	Size	Characteristics
Regional Parks	400 ha	Catchment up to 3.2 - 8km, contain natural areas of, e.g., heathland, for informal recreation.
Metropolitan Parks	60 Ha	Catchment 3.2kms or more, have natural areas or formal parks for active and passive recreation.
District Parks	20 ha	Catchment 1.2km, have a variety of natural features, playing fields and children's play areas.
Local Parks	2ha	Catchment about 0.4km, provide court games, children's play areas and sitting out areas..
Small Local Parks	up to 2 ha	Catchment about 0.4km, have gardens, children's playgrounds, sitting out areas and specialist areas.
Linear Open Spaces	Variable	Include canal towpaths, disused railway lines, footpaths, provide for informal recreation, including nature conservation.

4 Sheffield Parks Regeneration Strategy⁵ 1993

This was sponsored by the City Council and Sheffield Wildlife Trust. Its recommendations included proposals that the City Council should:

- a) Recognise the significance of the green environment to economic development.
- b) Recognise the possible contribution of inner city parks in achieving a better quality of life in the most deprived areas.
- c) Implement the Sheffield Nature Conservation Strategy
- d) Enable the voluntary sector to contribute more fully to the regeneration of inner city parks.

5 Standards for access to urban greenspace. Recommendation by the UK MAB Urban Forum and English Nature

The following definition was proposed by Box and Harrison in 1993⁶, together with the standard, (subsequently taken up by English Nature).

Definition of natural greenspace in urban areas: "Land, water and geological features which have been naturally colonised by plants and animals and which are accessible on foot to large numbers of residents."

Proposed standards:

- a) An urban resident should be able to enter an urban greenspace of at least 2 ha within 0.5 kilometres of their home.
- b) Provision should be made for Local Nature Reserves in every urban area at a minimum level of 1ha per 1,000 population.

⁴ London Planning Advisory Committee. 1992. **Open Space Planning in London.**

⁵ Barber, A.. 1993. *Sheffield Parks Regeneration Strategy.* Cinteract Consultancy Service

⁶ Box, J. and Harrison, C. 1993. *Natural Spaces in Urban Places.* *Town & Country Planning* 62(9) 231 to 235

In *Accessible Natural Greenspaces in Towns and Cities* 1995,⁷ the authors suggested that the minimum distance criteria should be 280 metres (about five minutes walk) rather than 500 metres.

5 Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal 1995⁸

This key report, done in partnership with 12 local authorities, identified the problems of low investment, low resources and low priority. It said that “today they (parks) are often an afterthought at the bottom of the political agenda”. Associated research found that most users walk to parks, and that 40% of them visit their local park at least twice a week.

The strategy advocated for reviving parks was based on the arguments that:

- a) Not all open space is sacrosanct
- b) Parks may make ideal settings for the development and siting of new education, social and cultural facilities.
- c) Best results will only be achieved by different sectors and interests working together.

6. The Green Flag Awards: Standards for Parks

Launched in 1996 this scheme aims to raise standards in public parks. It provided the first benchmark (of eight criteria) by which to measure the quality of parks and open spaces. They are:

- b) A healthy, safe and secure park
- c) A clean and well maintained park
- d) Sustainability
- e) Conservation and heritage
- f) Community involvement
- g) Marketing
- h) Management

The scheme’s success may be judged by its highlighting in the Urban White Paper⁹ as good practice which should be developed as a contribution to the urban renaissance.

7 The growing recognition of the multi-functional values of open spaces in urban areas.

Barker (1997)¹⁰ identified that green networks have a range of uses “beyond the early ideas that they are important simply for recreation (from sport to picnics) and for beauty. They also address the needs of wildlife, flood control, improved water quality, outdoor education, local transport and many other urban infrastructure needs (Searns 1995). Their design and management therefore involves economic, cultural and ecological criteria. Their multiple functions – and multiple problems – demand attention from people having a wide range of skills.”

These green networks comprise a wide variety of formal and informal open spaces that include parks and designated public open space. Their management should take into account the many functions which it is now recognised that they have.

⁷ Harrison, C., Burgess, J., Millward, A., and Dawe, G. 1995. *Accessible Natural Greenspace in Towns and Cities: A Review of Size and Distance Criteria*. English Nature Research Report

⁸ Greenhalgh, E. and Worpole, K. 1995

⁹ Department of the Environment Transport & Regions. 2000. *Our Towns and Cities: the Future (Urban White Paper)*. London. The Stationery Office

¹⁰ *op. cit.*

8 The Urban Task Force's recommendation that consideration should be given to extending Green Belt provisions to valuable urban open spaces.

In their final report ("Towards an Urban Renaissance"¹¹) the Urban Task Force made 105 recommendations. Amongst these was this:

"Retain the general presumption against development on designated Green Belt. Review whether there is a case for designating valuable urban green space in a similar way".

The Task Force says: "Green Belts have played a vital role over many decades in resisting urban decline ... There is also a need for a more sophisticated approach in protecting and designating urban green space. There are important green buffer zones and strategic gaps both within and between our urban areas that could be given the same weight in development control terms as the Green Belt designation. This would help to protect urban biodiversity and ensure strong urban green space networks."

9 Our Towns and Cities: the Future (Urban White Paper) 2000

This states:

"Well-managed public open space such as greens, squares, parks, children's play areas, allotments, woodlands and recreational and sporting areas improve the attractiveness of urban areas and help promote healthier life styles... We want everyone to have access to well maintained and safe parks, play areas and other open spaces close to where people live and work."

It also proposed a number of new initiatives:

- a) A minister directly responsible for overseeing the development of a vision and proposals for the parks, play areas and open spaces.
- b) An advisory committee, chaired by the Minister, to:
 1. Review the current state of parks
 2. Consider how different types of open space can best meet the needs of townspeople
 3. Examine innovation in the design, creation and maintenance of open spaces

The White Paper also commits the government to improving information and commissioning research on the way parks are used and by whom, what users want and what is currently provided.

10 Green Spaces Better Places¹²

The report of the Urban Green Spaces Task Force, which was set up in January 2001 to advise the Government on improving the quality of urban parks. The Task Force proposed the following criteria for good practice:

- Understanding the values needs and aspirations of local people
- Understanding the green space itself
- Forming a collaborative and enabling partnership
- Developing a clear and shared vision for the space
- Secure political and organisational support
- Plan sustainable management and maintenance arrangements
- Ensure long term viability and sustainability
- Recognise and promote (changing) heritage and cultural values

¹¹ Urban Task Force. 1999. *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. London, E. & F.N. Spon

¹² DTLR, Urban Green Spaces Task Force 2002, *Green Spaces Better Places*. London.

- Encourage innovation and learning
- Encourage imaginative play facilities which address a range of needs

The Task Force recognised that information on the quality and amount of green space within urban areas is incomplete and fragmented, with no central source and no single accurate set of figures. The difficulties in establishing accurate figures include poor definition of green space types and categories.

11 From Cheapest to Best Value.

Competitive tendering for local authorities' grounds maintenance¹³ came into place in 1994. It was frequently criticised for producing rigid contracts based on standard specifications and inputs rather than desired outcomes for users. There was inflexibility¹⁴, such that work obviously needed was not done if it was not in the contract.

The replacement programme to CCT, Best Value, was instigated by the 1999 Local Government Act. It aimed to have a much greater emphasis on needs and outcomes for users of any service, as well as requiring consultation with service users and alternative providers.

Other reports and research projects include:

- The Audit Commission's 1993 four part study¹⁵
- The Planning and Management of Urban Open Space in Scotland 1999
- The House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and the Region's 1999 report, which recommended that there should be an Urban Parks and Greenspaces Agency¹⁶
- Rethinking Open Space¹⁷
- Research which demonstrates the benefits to health of just being able to walk into or enjoy the view of an open space with trees and grass, discussed at a conference in 1999, organised by the National Urban Forestry Unit and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health.¹⁸
- Public Park Assessment 2001¹⁹

The clear messages from these and other sources include the need for:

- Dedicated (and increased) resources
- The Government to provide national leadership in this field
- Effective inventories of open spaces, coupled with accepted definitions of different types of open spaces
- Involvement of users and local communities in management of parks and open spaces
- Integrating recreation, amenity, health, heritage and nature conservation considerations
- Proper strategic planning for parks and open spaces

¹³ Audit Commission. 1988. *Competitive Management of Parks and Green Spaces*. London. The Stationery Office

¹⁴ Greenhalgh, L. and Warpole, K. 1996. *People, Parks and Cities*. Department of the Environment. London. The Stationery Office

¹⁵ The Audit Commission. 1993. *Realising the Benefits of Competition*. London. The Stationery Office

¹⁶ House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee Report. 1999. *Town and Country Parks*. The Stationery Office. London

¹⁷ Central Research Unit Scottish Executive. 2001. *Rethinking Open Space*. Development Department Research Programme Research Findings No. 108. Kit Campbell Associates

¹⁸ Trees and Healthy Living, Wolverhampton, 17 November 1999

¹⁹ Heritage Lottery Fund. 2001. *Public Park Assessment*. Published on the HLF Website

A New Champion For Urban Green Space?²⁰

The commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) was commissioned by the Deputy Prime Minister in October 2002 to act as the nation's champion for urban space, with a particular focus on green spaces. Early priorities for CABE are to:

- Encourage local authorities to have a strategy to improve their urban spaces (particularly green spaces)
- Establish a national campaign and to raise public expectation of and commitment to improving urban public space
- Involve communities more directly in the management of neighbourhood space
- Promote urban forestry and wildlife needs
- Improve children's playgrounds
- Influence the creation of new well managed open space as part of the Housing Market Renewal Programme

Since CABE's appointment there has been criticism relating to its lack of experience and background within this field. It also remains the case that parks are the only non-statutory leisure service without its own national agency²¹. CABE does however include individuals with significant experience and knowledge, and they deserve a chance to show what they can do. The one big advantage of them being given this role is that for the first time the design, management and functions of the built and natural environments of towns and cities will be considered together. Too often until now there has been a lack of integration of these crucial elements, which together define the quality of urban environments. If CABE can give the right lead, and if this lead can be brokered through the new "centres of excellence" in urban design, then perhaps we will see a resurgence of interest and investment in parks and open spaces. Dare we say that there may be a renaissance in this vital aspect of urban life?

This is a much shortened version of an original paper. The full version can be downloaded from the UK Man and Biosphere's Urban Forum web site www.ukmaburbanforum.org.uk

²⁰ CABE wins major new role...2002 Press Release CABE web site www.Cabe.org.uk

²¹ Barber A. Parks Still Poor Relation. *Regeneration and Renewal* p.23. November 2002