Neoliberalism And The Urban Park: Community Involvement In Management Of The Philadelphia Park System

Emma Schad
Faculty Advisor, Dr. John Tresch
Department of Science, Technology and Society
University of Pennsylvania
January 2015
Abstract

The public urban park systems of America come from a long tradition of universal accessibility and provide a physical site for community creation. The park systems present the public sphere at its optimal level. The public sphere has become increasingly threatened by the influence of neoliberalism on public governance. The introduction, and continued infiltration, of the private sector in the realm of public service has threatened the future of a public space. This situation is currently being played out in the management of public park systems within cities. The solution from Philadelphia’s Department of Parks and Recreation represents an intriguing solution by fostering community Friends’ groups to steward neighborhood parks, and partnering with a private non-profit, the Fairmount Park Conservancy, to help fill system-funding gaps.

Introduction

The following paper is the result of interests I first explored in a research paper on the effect of a public park space’s design on park usership. That led me to conduct further research into the management of urban public parks and their history. In combination with research into the history of urban parks in America, I also researched their localized management in Philadelphia. In this research I was aided by my employment, beginning in June 2014, as a Stewardship team member with the Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation.

As a resident of Philadelphia, I had personal experience with the park system in Philadelphia prior to my employment in the Department of Parks and Recreation. As an employee, however, I discovered the interworking of the maintenance and use of these...
spaces and I simultaneously realized the unique historical position the spaces are in as well as the invisibility that cloaks their management structure.

Discussion of public space in recent decades has concerned itself with the repercussions of consumerism and corporate sponsorship muddling the modern interpretation of public. The public arena of the street and the market has been expanded to the shopping mall and the Internet. The question of where the truly public realm is still remains and must be asked. The truly public nature of these spaces is brought into question when the work done to them, for them, or begotten by them, comes from private sponsorship. This consideration remains even more relevant for every day discourse as the Neoliberalist movement of the past three decades continues to shape popular opinion on governance. As more favor is bestowed on privatizing previously public services the terrain of publicness will undoubtedly change to reflect larger structuring that is increasingly less communal. The neighborhood parks of any metropolis seem an unlikely location for this discussion to play out, but they provide an apt playing field.

Parks play a special role in the discussion of both the public sphere and the replacement of public services with private business power. The urban public park is both private property, being owned and operated by the state, and public domain, claimed by indiscriminate citizen use. The management of the park system is controlled by a government department, yet private citizens carry out an increasingly substantial role in these operations. The collision of public land and private use makes the urban park an item that eludes classification, as it is difficult to place it firmly in any one space on an
organizational chart depicting the public sphere. More concretely, though everyone does not live in cities, urban public space can be ranked as an ideal context with which to discuss the public sphere. In their introduction to *The Politics of Public Space*, Low and Smith speak of this contextualization saying from “Greek antiquity onward, public space is almost by definition urban space, and in many current treatments of public space the urban remains the privileged scale of analysis and cities the privileged site.” Ultimately, the urban park is a patriotic place that traces its history back perhaps formally to the opened gardens of royal estates in Europe, but is rather better tied to the American impetus and early settlement design.

A history of the urban park in its western context provides some illumination to the tradition of their stewardship as well as a guide to the divergence inherent in the American tradition of park establishment. The public urban park has been an integral feature of civic design since Roman times. Rome had its promenades, such as Campus Aggripae, a long stretch of landscaped green in the greater Campus Flaminus, a large campus in a series of campuses that speckled the city. These were lands held by the Roman Emperor and used by the public. Public park areas would not be a tradition continued in western city making, however. The dark ages and medieval Europe began a familiar narrative of western history with feudal administration and power tied to land ownership. A power system predicated upon land ownership and familial rights to that land coupled with the very little time held for recreation for the average person (much less a healthy population) left the idea of open space for public enjoyment an amusing concept.
As the feudal system grew and princely power began to encompass more and more towns and terrain, emphasis on the construction of castles and fortified centers of power became standard. Decades of established land owning families produced castles and manicured manors that facilitated an ever-growing appetite for curated natural space, with calculated landscape architecture and gardens dominated by exact by a contemplation of aesthetic rather than natural affect. Nature brought under control projected their owners’ domineering position in the power structure. A reflection of wealth, extensive gardens and planted lands became increasingly fashionable for wealthy European families as well as staple features of the ruling families’ dwellings.\textsuperscript{3} Subsequently, parks and gardens became the exclusive domain of the wealthy throughout Europe whose extensive grounds were explicitly private. A chief feature in their design included the exterior hedging, fencing, or other large topography that screened in and excluded outside viewing.\textsuperscript{4} In time, it became routine for the private owners to allow some public access to the space, if only for limited periods. It is from this tradition of private gardens being opened to the public that the legacy of public parks in Europe began. The naming of these areas itself borrows from traditional terminology. “In Europe landscaped estates owned by European royal or noble families have always been referred to as parks, and some of them became the forerunners of today’s parks.”\textsuperscript{5} That would be today’s parks in Europe. The American tradition of parks is one all its own, and though later designers of parks would look to their European counterparts, the American tradition is one that began from the outset of town creation and in large part was spurred by early
settlers’ reaction to the historical precedence of exclusion and private rights to a commons.

The American tradition begins with the New England commons and the designation of common land accessible to all. Beginning with the Boston Green, in 1634, and the New Haven Green, in 1641, the establishment of freely accessible grounds represented the resentment of the colonists toward grandfathered systems of land ownership. Indeed, the commons originated as practical space and were left largely void of design. These commons were “originally set aside for grazing cattle and training militias.” The commons were virtually unimproved versions of their surrounding settlements that claimed none of the adornments or design efforts that have become a part of urban park tradition today. In fact, this type of early-reserved commons and plain square was more an extension of a city or settlement space than a “refuge,” as would later develop in park implementation. These spaces were preserved through city development and the original forty-four acres of land remains today’s Boston Commons, while the now gated City Hall Park in New York City was the site of its original commons. The landscape of where human activity was centered would begin to change as cities became increasingly dominant locations on the map. Though the spirit of the commons would dictate their legacy as universally accessible public space, their stark aesthetic would not continue and the spaces we are more familiar with today all reflect preconceived planning.
The idea of the commons was endorsed and replicated in town creation all across America, however a hiatus from its use was presented in the establishment of truly urban areas. In 1790, the first federal census noted that “only five percent of the population was urban” but “by 1810, one in every twenty Americans lived in cities; by 1840, one in twelve; by 1860, one in six, by 1880, one in four; by 1900, one in three; by 1920, one in two.” As cities blossomed, the idea of how to reconcile within them a seemingly opposing element of nature became a chief preoccupation of urban planners and later landscape architects.

The early nineteenth century city saw garden cemeteries before they came around to park creation. The urban atmosphere was fueled by increased industrialization brought on by technological advancements. While progress was good, the increasingly dense and polluted city was beginning to turn its own residents, glad for work but paying for it with smog filled lungs, against their living environment. The city was criticized for its artificial nature and overcrowding; “industrialization, technological innovation, rapid growth, and increased migration up through the 1850s had made American cities especially vulnerable to criticisms.” The cities seemed to be ever expanding in both population and size with little consideration given to working class quality of life. Until this point, or until the progressive era of park reform began, beginning with the pleasure ground epoch, recreation occurred “in whatever small pockets and central areas were nearest a person’s residence or work: burial grounds, plazas, market gardens, tenement courts, settlement houses, schoolyards, and streets…”. At this point in Europe, several public parks existed in England, primarily through the opening of private estate grounds
and “the older royal parks in many European cities had by then been opened to public use.”

The first precursors to urban parks in the 1820s and 30s in America were graveyards. Graveyards remained untouched by development and were some of the only free and grassy space in cities with a tradition of hosting recreation, although some were exceptional sites of enjoyment. Often referred to as garden-style cemeteries, these include Mount Auburn in Cambridge Massachusetts, and Laurel Hill in Philadelphia. These sites were not macabre locations. Rather, due to the emphasis placed on the incorporation of life and nature into their design, they became popular destinations for picnicking and sites of “winding, lush, picturesque, strolling grounds.” The heavy use of these spaces and the need to bring nature into the artificiality assaulting city dwellers daily with little to no inner-city reprieve, fueled the park movement of the mid-nineteenth century and colored its starting intentions. Thus, the impetus for urban parks in America can be tied to the backlash of urban life that introduced increasingly indoor only work and belching smokestacks of endless production.

The parks were fantasy avoidance lands meant to capture and encapsulate the wonders of the country and present them to the city resident. There was a desire for park locations as fortunate city dwellers flocked to “lively groves” that lay just outside towns and cities along the river and became ever more popular escape locations.” And, by the 1850s, municipal parks became “potent political issues.” As Cranz remarks, though there were predecessors to these landscapes in Europe, the call for these spaces was less
an American cry to remain in vogue, but for reprieve: “The parks that Americans built to improve their cities derived not from European models but from anti-urban ideal that dwelt on the traditional prescription for relief from the evils of the city-to escape to the country.”17 The Romantic movement of art, poetry and outlook on the spirit rousing nature that informed popular culture and thought of the time was very much a reaction to the industrial reality unfolding with each chapter of the progress narrative. Underway by the mid nineteenth century, heroic landscapes contrasted with the smoky and manufactured aesthetic of the city, the place of overcrowded housing tenements, sizable immigrant populations, factory work life, indoor occupation, and epidemic disease. The philosophy of romanticism preached a widespread belief that “nature and natural scenery had the power to uplift and restore the human spirit.”18 Thus, it was popular opinion of nature as idyllic and romantic notions of nature that began the park movement in America and set the course for the establishment of pleasure grounds with grandness of scale.

It was under this romantic philosophy that urban planning received heavy reconsideration on how to best address the taxing environment the city placed on everyday life. In 1848, shortly before his death, prominent American landscape artist and horticulturist Andre Jackson Downing would prophetically call for the incorporation of park space into city design saying, “Plant spacious parks in your cities and unloose their gates as wide as the gates of morning to the whole people.”11 Landscape parks were thus born from the call for space and a reprieve from city congestion. It is impossible to separate the design of pleasure grounds from the popular culture and its construct of nature that existed at the time. Promenades and “tree-lined path for strolling by
fashionable citizens who lived near by” became incorporated into more affluent areas and bringing nature under the control of urban design was integrated into more dimensions of the city construct. More discussion and consideration for public health across urban reform movements was a trademark of the progressive era and the establishment of landscape parks was a part of this push to improve the city.

Ebenezer Howard, who lived in Chicago in the second half of the nineteenth century adjacent to Lake Park, was a forefather of the New Towns movement. Howard’s utopian design of the garden city emphasized universal access to fresh air and open spaces and emphasized that this proximity should exist especially near workspaces. A healthy city to Howard, directly inspired by Hygeia the city of Health a circulation on city planning in connection with health improvement, entailed “relatively low population density, good housing, wide thoroughfares, and underground railway and plenty of open space.” An answer to these calls was forming in industrial cities across the Northeastern seaboard. Most famous for his landscape design, Frederick Law Olmsted was at the front of the landscape park movement, and his design work, together with Calvert Vaux’s, produced iconic areas still revered today. Part of the duo’s fame was due to their work on Prospect Park in Brooklyn in 1867, and consultation on Fairmount Park in Philadelphia around the same time period. Perhaps their greatest achievement was their design work on Central Park. Though Vaux was an original designer, after Jackson Downing’s untimely death, Olmsted stepped in and solidified his legacy in landscape architectural history. What Central Park was to achieve, with its crags, waterfalls and hills right in the heart of the city, was an encapsulation of nature’s wonder for an urban audience.

SCHAD Thesis 2014
These early landscape parks were spectacles in themselves, astonishing large campuses where the city resident could truly lose themselves in their surroundings and escape the bustle. These early landscape parks established in the industrial bastion of the city were meant to be experiences themselves and to be enjoyed as the site of strolling, racing, concerts, picnicking and diversion. In an 1866 report to the General Commissioners of New York City, Olmsted shared his opinion of the park’s true services namely “scenery offering the most agreeable contrast to that of the rest of the town; and opportunity for people to come together for the single purpose of enjoyment, unembarrassed by the limitations with which there are amusements as are elsewhere offered.”

The pleasure landscapes made their way into the 20th century serving the public as premier outdoor destinations to combat an almost exclusively indoor working atmosphere. The large meadows and greenways of the parks were peace inducing, reminiscent of rolling countryside. Yet, these locations were also optimal grounds for sport. Organized sport was gaining in popularity and “[i]n the 1890s vigorous athletics took an increasingly large place in park programming.” It was not just sport, but organized athletic activity that the public most desired. “Baseball was the most popular… and has been played since the end of the civil war.”

America’s growing controversy over their use for such activity lead to a realization that explicitly created recreation space was needed. The use of meadowed areas in the pleasure ground parks was coming under fire as the turbulent use of the land for athletics affected its impact as an executed natural display, and “as a result of differing conceptions of park purpose even walking on the grass which was being destroyed in the course of use became a controversial matter.”
Whereas in the early to mid 1800s the wealthier members of the city might have had the time for enjoying the pleasure grounds amenities and activity, by 1900 a broadening of the middle class coupled with the importance placed on activity during leisure time ushered in the Reform era parks of the 1900s to 1930s where recreation reigned supreme.

In fact, this era represents a paradigm shift in the conception of metropolitan parks and the first era of landscape parks. With larger portions of the population possessing increased pockets of leisure time, emphasis on its productive use was in part answered through the establishment of organized leagues facilitated by municipal and recreational facilities. The improvement of recreation on a local populace’s health and spirit was a link that was cemented into public mind and attitude with the increased construction of recreation facility parks in the 1930s and was made possible by local park construction funds from federal sources. Contemporaries endorsed Howard’s earlier projections for the garden city of easily accessible open space and city-planning boards began to see that park space delivered in a systemic structure, as opposed to large sanctuaries, would be most beneficial. As the high profile work of Olmsted in Boston revealed to his contemporaries and other municipalities, the goal of parks was to provide “natural scenery within walking distance of all residents.” Increased access to the parks was created both by a growing populace possessed with increased free time and municipal commitment to expanding park systems. The reform era’s initiative of bringing equitable access to all areas of the city is a system is ingrained in the agenda of Parks and Recreation departments in American cities today.
Increasing access in the interest of expanding recreation opportunities to children was a theme championed most ardently by the reform movement. A decade earlier, Olmsted had designed an outdoor gymnasium in the West end of Boston, a precursor to the jungle gyms.\textsuperscript{13} Recreational parks were understood to encourage active park use. The standard design of playground area has been attributed to landscape architects in Chicago at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, particularly Chicago’s South Park district.\textsuperscript{14} Incorporation of playground areas into the park became the model emulated by other metropolitan areas. Greener parkways and boulevards would also characterize this time and add to the impression of ideal public lands within city perimeters. Indeed, the reform era has left the biggest legacy on park design and it is its spirit that many modern park practices follow, namely increasing accessibility to parkland.

The reform era extended the access to open space, nature, and recreation to more of the urban populace. At the same time, the country began to consider its lands as more than just raw resources and economic capital, but as patriotic splendor desirous of preservation. The notion of “reserving scenic land from development through public acquisition led to the creation of state and county parks all over the country.”\textsuperscript{15} In truth, this had begun in 1866 with the establishment of the Mariposa Big Tree Grove, later Yosemite National Park, and the establishment of Yellowstone, the first National Park, in 1872, but it gathered real steam after the turn of the last century, establishing the state park movement. The cause gathered real steam when national parklands became a presidential initiative of Theodore Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{16} This emphasis on conservation was a continuance of the value nature had to the American ideal system, and the strain
presented by city life and increased mechanization. Sachs eloquently displays the scene saying, “[t]he national park system, sometimes referred to as ‘America’s Best Idea,’ is colored by its origins in an era when industrialization seemed to touch almost every aspect of American life…”.¹⁷

Though parks and civic greening were helping to combat the primary complaints of urban dwellers, many felt the city was an alienating landscape and there was a strong belief that the town atmosphere yielded stronger family ties. In 1929, the first of the wave of New Towns, Radburn, New Jersey, was established, designed to eliminate “disorder” make room for automobile use and “prominently feature[] an interior park.”¹⁸ Fleeing the congestion of urban life and to combat servicemen’s rampant dislocation, many people moved postwar to manufactured towns and what would grow to become the next organization phase of American civilization: the suburb. After World War II, the New Deal’s “park-building regime” began a decade worth of projects that were the chief contributors to new parkland in the municipal system. The end of the 1950s, and the beginning of the 1960s emphasized federal funding emphasized in the direction of national recreation areas and the establishment of national seashores, creating escapes from the city easily accessible to urban dwellers. ¹⁹ For the most part, the majority of existent urban parkland had been doled out and established by the early 1970s. From democratic roots, fostered in civic-minded soil, sprang the urban park agenda. The benefits to urban life wrought by this agenda have solidified parks as a stalwart of urban planning and, in our modern age, proxies of healthy cities.

SCHAD Thesis 2014
Existent park systems, managed by municipal government, are the webbing of America’s cities. Parks with a heavy tradition of recreational use and associated facilities continue, while pass through areas or squares continue to serve the urban community through their power to facilitate social interaction and provide a destination for city dwellers. The urban park narrative has culminated in cities whose residents know green spaces and universal accessibility to recreation areas as a civic right. In a “greening age” where the question of the affects of human actions on our planet are pursued at every turn of the industrial cycle, renewed enthusiasm for the support of these park systems has resulted in increased interest in their vitality from non-public agencies.

Urban Governance the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Urban governance over the past thirty years, beginning with the Reagan Administration, has reconciled budget losses with increased partnership with the private sector. Park management has not been untouched by this privatization, and Philadelphia’s own answer in the form of autonomous park “Friends” groups that steward neighborhood parks represents one answer to the trend. The merits of this system will be considered in a later section, but it is important to first contextualize the greater governance environment that has caused new park management practices in Philadelphia and other American cities, namely Seattle, Washington and Chicago.

After the Second World War, the urban middle class began “a counter-urban movement of a scale not before witnessed in the history of cities,” a process that would bring the suburb into new prominence. Suburbanization and white flight accelerated the
“disinvestment in inner cities” and, as a result of the loss of industrial jobs in many urban areas and subsequently the “transformation of labor markets,” American cities were gaining reputations for poor housing, depressed downtowns and filth. A three-decade long decline in manufacturing jobs in the city lead to population depletion, a shift in the kind of employment available to city residents, and a reduction in services that a city was able to provide. The 1960s were a decade of declining downtown areas and ushered in the nonmetropolitan area boom of the 1970s where metropolitan growth was outpaced by suburban areas. During the 1970s, population growth in the nation’s fifty largest cities was below the national average and in the Northeast quadrant its eleven largest cities had population decline. By the end of the 1970s, there was a growth of “producer services,” like finance, real estate, insurance, accounting and advertising in urban areas and the previously dominant blue collar section of the workforce continued to be replaced with white collar occupation. By the early 1980s, a rebounding job climate in metropolitan areas as well as growing populations signaled that cities were in a period of turnaround. However, at the same time, funding structures for municipal services were reeling from federal budget cuts and restructuring themselves to meet demands. A key change was the opening of public services, prior to which were exclusively federally supported, to the private sector. During the fiscal crises of the 1970s, public agencies, competing for dwindling federal funds, were faced with a taxpayer base that was increasingly reluctant to “pay for the labor necessary to maintain public space…a starkly visual iteration of a tragedy of the commons in park meadows turned to sandlots or recreational facilities abandoned to arsonists.”
Federal aid peaked in 1978 and though urban population was on a rebound by 1980, Philadelphia especially was on a steady upward trajectory, the results of earlier fiscal crises had created a public disenchanted with central government. During the 1970s the amount of public space that was lost grew as governments instituted fees for previously free zoos, museums and forests. Neoliberal economics were applied to public administration as municipal governments sought to survive cuts in federal grant money and funding. After 1978, and accelerated in 1981, federal aid to localities was declining and “major cuts in outlays for urban programs” were the new Reagan Administration’s plan. Under the Reagan Administration, “total grants declined...by $6.6billion; and the consolidation into block grants was used to justify cuts of up to 25 percent.” Along with smaller grant awards, budget reductions at the national scale largely stemmed from the termination of the CETA, Public Service Employment Program. Parks and Recreation staff numbers were greatly affected by this closure and public space custodianship suffered. The grant money at the state and national level was characterized during this period by a focus on public service in the areas of health, education and welfare. This affected the funding stream for other public services, resulting in the need for economic growth and stimulus to originate in the cities themselves.

Due to the employment paradigm shift in urban areas and the stimulus that it gave to the cities with ever-increasing populations, overall by the end of the 1980s cities were in better economic positions than they had been a decade earlier. However, the declining role of federal funding in the upkeep of public services ushered in new

SCHAD Thesis 2014
management strategies by municipal governments. Understanding that revenue streams needed to originate from within the city itself, urban governments began efforts to develop and invest in programs that would stimulate business in their areas and prop up their economic development. As a result, decreased federal funding gave cities a bifurcated focus splitting funding and policy arenas into economic growth and development and public services. This lead to funding answers in the form of private partnerships and corporate sponsorship. The day to day look at the results of public governance’s operation shift to the leveraging of public services, “public entrepreneurship,” from the past’s funding dependent on being federally assured is best explained by Kirklin: “A mayor in the nineteen sixties, such as Richard Lee in New Haven, could build a coalition in which grants from the national government played a large role, but today’s (1988) mayors do not have that option. Instead they are more likely to follow the paths of Tom Bradley, whose approach to governing Los Angeles has emphasized building coalitions with private interests around development projects that will stimulate economic growth, job creation, and increased public revenues.”

Now municipal governments had to see the private sector as a funding source in order to stay alive and ensure the success of public administrations. The cities of the modern era have a new federalism, as Wood comments this new federalism is conceived of by a three-track strategy. This strategy includes the persistent avenue of federal aid, reduced but not eliminated, state grants and lastly the possibility of help from the private sector and not-for-profit institutions. New entrepreneurial tactics of growth and economic development have replaced social service delivery preoccupations that
characterized the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies. As a casualty of this shift, public lands fell to the wayside. While their cultural import is immeasurable, the cost of their upkeep seemed daunting to cities now burdened with finding funding to keep up with all of its services. Renewed investment in public lands has mostly come from the preoccupation with driving a city’s revenue engine and keeping public spaces enticing for tourism. Parks and Recreation systems have responded all over the country by echoing the attention given to the private sector from their parent municipal structure.

Public lands over the last three decades have received the support of private funding allowing management services to continue while such support has changed the nature of the public sphere. If public land is no longer the sole dominion of public departments, and funding comes from the private sector, is there not a chip removed from the veneer of the public sphere? The Central Park Conservancy, created as a backlash to the space’s physical decline through the past two decades, “became a flagship for a new model of governance of the public space of parks.”36 The Fairmount Park Foundation, later becoming the Fairmount Park Conservancy, was begun in 1997 as a 501 c(3) non-profit whose private fundraising efforts were directed at preservation initiatives of the historical parklands. Conservancies, non-profit fundraising sources partnered with public park administrations, have become the engines of park stewardship across the nation. The changes in the public sphere begotten from neoliberalist approaches to public administration infiltrated public opinion of government to the extent that many would rather donate to an organization championing the public land’s cause than support increased taxation for the explicit use of city land conservation. This interesting notion,
and now adopted mode of land conservation through public and private sponsorship, is succinctly put as “Donors, whether foundations or corporations or individuals, are usually more comfortable making gifts to non-profit organization, even if the donation eventually supports a government project.”

In an era of defunded public service from the federal level, Parks and Recreation entities have been resourceful in their self-preservation through hunting and gathering other sources of income. In Chicago, their Parks and Recreation system’s $435 million dollar operating budget is explicitly derived from property taxes. In a similar move, Seattle recently passed its Seattle Parks District initiative that will see the department jointly funded by a city fund and property taxes. In an interesting system, Minneapolis has an Independent Park system, ratified by voters in 1883, that has a publicly elected board. When Horace Cleveland devised a master plan for Minneapolis in the nineteenth century, it was designed around a park system to be put in place. At this time, the Progressive Era’s explicit public interest lay in the preservation of such a system and an interest in it having autonomy of funding.

Recently, the importance of linking public space with profit generation to capture more funding was stressed by panelists from a nationally represented pool of Parks and Recreation senior staff at a 2014 roundtable discussion in Philadelphia hosted by the city’s Park Alliance group. It is proven that well kept parks improve proximal land values and raise property taxes, generating revenue for the city. Parks, especially large ones like Memorial Park in Chicago and Central Park in New York, add tourism appeal.
for their city. In the new era of park management, to keep space free and for the public, a role has been given to the private world. Philadelphia has responded to the crisis of stewardship for its public lands through both its partnership with a robust fundraising non-profit and the fostering of an extensive Friends’ group network.

Case Study: Philadelphia

The City’s Department of Parks and Recreation (PPR) manages the public park system in Philadelphia. The park system encompasses approximately 10,000 acres of land and includes 177 parks. William Penn founded Philadelphia with a vision of a “Green Countrie Towne.” The City’s initial design of five squares exists today, albeit the fifth square was used as the site of City Hall. The existing park system in Philadelphia fulfills Penn’s vision of the marriage between nature and city. Philadelphia is home to one of the largest public park systems in the country, spanning neighborhood parks, recreation lands, forested areas and watershed parks. The Philadelphia park system includes Fairmount Park, which holds the title of largest inter-city park, encompassing 92,000 acres.

Although the Philadelphia park system is stewarded chiefly by the PPR and its management services section, the last two decades have placed increasing weight on citizen involvement in park upkeep. Senior staff at the PPR, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and Fairmount Park Conservancy view 1990 as the beginning mark of the current management structure. Barbara McCabe, Director of Parks Stewardship, recalls the situation leading up to this new structure as follows. The parks had been well maintained...
through the 1950s and 1960s. “There were massive cutbacks in the 70s and 80s and the Rec Department lost half of its staff and by the mid 80’s they couldn’t manage the same size system. The City was in tough times…Cuts in services, lack of and deferred maintenance and when you have places like that, drugs and illegal behavior flock and they become the site of a lot of negative activity. The parks were in a downward spiral.”

The 1980s were characterized by declining city budgets. Philadelphia, like many other post-industrial cities, was handicapped by decreased federal funding and the loss of manufacturing jobs. Loss of jobs led to a decrease in population. By the early 1990s, “funding for parks was severely cut, and many parks in the city showed serious signs of neglect.” At this time, public outcry at the state of the parks was met with some neighborhoods undertaking of park maintenance and, at a system-wide level, aid from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society’s Philadelphia Green Program. The Philadelphia Green Program launched the Parks Revitalization Project in 1993 and designed it as a “partnership between Philadelphia Green, city government and citizen volunteers.” The aim of the Revitalization Project was to foster neighborhood Friends’ groups at three pilot park sites across the city: Vernon Park in Germantown; Norris Square in Northeastern Philadelphia; and Wharton Square in South Philadelphia. To a very limited extent, Friends’ groups already existed elsewhere in the city and were true grass roots creations. A Friends’ group beginning in 1980 supported Fairmount Park and shortly afterward one was formed in Clark Park in West Philadelphia. However, the partnership between the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society’s Philadelphia Green Program and
Philadelphia’s Department of Recreation (Philadelphia’s Department of Parks and its Department of Recreation did not merge formally until 2010), was the chief impetus for the creation of volunteer groups who rallied around neighborhood parks throughout the city.49 These Friends groups, with the infusion of private capital from a non-profit (Pennsylvania Horticultural Society), presented the solution to a problem of municipal underfunding and maintenance woes.

Bolstered by the provision of training and initial organization by the union of city government department and private non-profit, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS), the Friends’ groups strictly represented the neighborhood parks and were composed almost entirely of residents living near them. Park maintenance, including tree pruning classes and PHS provided lessons on perennials and the Department of Recreation helped facilitate group organization and assisted them in running their first meeting. The Friends’ groups were encouraged to have autonomy and were aided by the Department of Recreation in understanding the permitting process for public events, fundraising, and what services and materials could be provided by the city. Grant money was accessible from PHS to groups that applied for it, aided by the Department of Recreation.

Prior to 2010, the parkland under the Department of Recreation excluded watershed parklands, \textit{i.e.}, all of the Wissahickon and Fairmount Park areas. The watershed parklands, prior to the merger of Philadelphia’s Department of Parks and its Department of Recreation in 2010, were maintained by a combination of government
funds and volunteer groups. However, unlike the Friends’ groups, these volunteers were not necessarily “neighbors” of the watershed lands, but were comprised of people from across the city and corporate donors. This stewardship situation surrounding the watershed parklands still exists.

In 2009, the Fairmount Park system joined PHS and the Department of Recreation’s Revitalization Project and spurred the formal marriage between the Department of Parks (previously comprised only of watershed parklands) and the Department of Recreation (previously comprised only of neighborhood parks and recreation facilities). A year later, in 2011, PHS, under new leadership, decided not to continue funding the Philadelphia Green Program. The PPR, with the loss of a major funding source crucial to the park system’s upkeep, and despite its healthy network of sweat equity found in its Friends’ groups, found itself faced with the situation of only being capable of providing baseline maintenance to its parklands. The Fairmount Park Conservancy (FPC), a non-profit founded in 1998, composed of community and business leaders raising funds for the Fairmount Park system, stepped in to fill a similar role to the one previously provided by PHS. This relationship is the current modus operandi of PPR. However, the Nutter Administration, with the support of Michael DiBerardinis, Deputy Mayor for Environmental and Community Resources for the City of Philadelphia and Commissioner of PPR, has provided additional resource to PPR, allowing it to increase its staff and capabilities. Under the leadership of Deputy Mayor DiBerardinis, PPR created its own stewardship team whose role is to represent the Department with FPC and to act as the liaison between the Department and community groups.
Much of the current success of the new partnership between FPC and PPR is due to the comprehensive mapping by PPR of the park system, identifying both neighborhood park locations and existing Friends’ groups. As a result of the comprehensive mapping of its park system, PPR now has a clear picture of where community based support exists and where neighborhoods without Friends’ groups are located. The new mode of park management is to preserve the relationship with these Friends’ groups and gauge the level of community support in a particular area. This allows PPR to obtain a full picture of where the system’s resources will be best received and where they are most needed. FPC provides both joint funding with PPR for citywide Friends’ group programming (the Steering Committee Dinner and meeting five times a year, Holiday Party and Summer Programming), as well as the funding for grants only eligible for Friends’ groups for improvements on parkland. Grant money, together with money raised by the Friends’ groups themselves, is used for improvements such as the creation of gardening sheds with water lines, programming such as concerts and outdoor entertainment, and seasonal festivals.

The joint funding of PPR and FPC allows the Friends’ groups to make a physical impact on their space and communities and not just fulfill routine maintenance objectives. PPR is incredibly bolstered by this private funding source whose presence enables neighborhood park vitality while not detracting from citywide park initiatives such as storm water management improvements, preservation of natural lands and recreational facility upkeep. The joint funding also enables PPR’s yearly tree and tool giveaways and sponsored Service Days. It gives each park with a successful Friends’
group a community voice and platform of advocacy when dealing with PPR. For example, if a park is cited for capital project money and several different jungle gym configurations are available, an existing Friends’ group can vote on its desired equipment. Successful Friends’ groups also ensure their own viability, as the greater their voice and their ability to obtain goods and services for their neighborhood park, the more likely it is that current volunteers will remain and new volunteers will be attracted to service.

Although it may seem basic, the presence of an efficient scheme of organization and a knowledge of the properties, areas and community leaders within the park system is crucial to PPR’s operations. “We have identified the spaces with our ‘friends,’ and we have mapped opportunities for future outreach and we want to maintain what we already have and [to] support them.” A crisis of knowledge of system organization existed during the park system’s worst years. In regard to these conditions, Barbara McCabe recalls that “in 1999, the former Recreation Department got into this partnership (Green Program) with PHS to address the neighborhood parks in our system that were getting absolutely no attention. No maintenance service, I worked in the Department for 14 years and I did not even know that we had these neighborhood parks in the system.” McCabe worked on developing a comprehensive list and location of the park system’s properties. This gave a voice to the people in those communities whose parks were not undervalued, but rather were underserved.

Friends’ Group’s Impact on The Public Sphere

SCHAD Thesis 2014
Ownership of a public good is paradoxical. Though public parks exist for the explicit use of all citizens, it is universally known that the property is still owned by someone. In almost all cases this is the city government and it is understood that it will maintain the property or at least be its ultimate custodian. There is a certain pleasure that accompanies transforming something that is intended for everyone and making it just for you. Bestowing upon a place a meaning that highlights a connection that you deem to be higher than another’s connection to that same space brings the space further into one’s own dominion. Public space made private holds the ability to claim an area that through your inhabitation of it becomes yours. When you are sitting on the park bench, no one else can occupy that same exact space. You have claimed that space. You are in public space, but you are occupying it, you are making it unusable to another, and it is serving you completely. Claiming public space can be done beyond the individual. In the city of Philadelphia, the parks in the best condition and with the most social programming have Friends’ groups. A Friends’ group, as defined by the city’s Parks and Recreation Department in its Friends’ group toolkit, is a “community-based volunteer group that is officially affiliated with Philadelphia Parks & Recreation…established to support and advocate for a specific park area.” Friends’ groups are community initiated, (though originally and continually government fostered), entities that perform routine clean up and maintenance of their neighborhood parks.

Director of Parks Stewardship, Barbara McCabe, identifies the ideal Friends’ group as being able to perform in four main areas: assistance with physical care of the park; programming; fundraising; and advocacy. “We can speak to the Friends’ group
and know that they are the pulse of the community.” This quote from McCabe illustrates the opportunity a Friends’ group system can give citizens for representation in public administration.

A study of the Friends’ groups of the Philadelphia park system operating under an umbrella of public/private municipal governance can provide a template for park systems in other American cities. However, we also can consider the role given to these grassroots foundations when looking to effectively manage other privatized sections of formerly public service areas, for example, schools. An examination of the successes and potential dangers of PPR’s use of Friends’ groups follows.

Friends’ groups fill in the gaps of maintenance provided by PPR’s baseline service. In a park system as large and inadequately funded as Philadelphia’s, neighborhood clean-ups of park space have real affect on preservation and maintenance ideals. In addition to citywide sponsored service days, most Friends’ groups hold monthly, bi-weekly, and, in some cases weekly, clean-up days, mornings or afternoons. If maintenance requires more than the group’s abilities, such as removal of a broken bench, electrical needs of park lighting, or dead tree removal, Friends’ groups can reach out to the member of their PPR Stewardship team to communicate the need for services. Having a reliable and consistent reporting mechanism, the system of land management can become more efficient. Electrical crews traditionally operate through canvassing of all parkland in a year; however, their skills can be expedited to areas of need, addressing issues in real time. This reporting service provided by Friends’ groups increases the
accuracy of city services and eliminates the need for government employees to monitor the parks. Because reports stem from the neighborhood, areas farther from Center City are given a chance to have equal representation. Park areas associated with heavy tourism or commercial traffic traditionally received more services because their appearance is noted by more people and because the businesses wield greater political power. The Friends’ groups help level the playing field and provide a voice to neighborhoods that were underserved in the past.

As McCabe mentioned, Friends’ groups can represent their community’s interests in the use of the public space. The presence of Friends’ groups at neighborhood parks provide a point of contact for obtaining community input on government projects. For example, Wissinoming Park in Northeast Philadelphia is the recipient of an upcoming 2015 capital project funds, financed through FPC, and will receive new playground equipment and extensive landscape work, as well as a rain garden and improved storm water management infrastructure. The landscape architecture firm, consulted by the FPC, produced several models for the playground area, including different color and equipment options. The Friends’ group was presented with the options and was able to choose the ultimate plan. Having community input on the project undoubtedly will endear the space to the community as well as increase a personal stake in the park’s future upkeep. One could imagine the situation playing out in many different scenarios; communities know what they want the most. A community may want a basketball court where funding money had placed a jungle gym. A Friends’ group can advocate for this.
Parks are the public space for communities to express their identity and some of the only places in the city where citizen initiated festivity can occur. Friends’ groups can add a quality of charm to city life. Watching your neighbors work on chalk drawing competitions or other activities aimed at general goodwill and facilitated by public space may be the only thing that provides a sense of community to a neighborhood. In an era when the publicness of public space is questioned and gated communities proliferate, the presence of this kind of community activity is crucial because it leads to neighbors interacting with neighbors. It restores faith in the ability to achieve the meaning of community in a city space and allows people to identify with a geographic space in a way that recalls tribal feelings of the village.

The activities facilitated by these Friends’ groups vary, but all contribute to an affect of creating a layered public sphere. Conrad Square in Fishtown runs a popular flea market every other weekend in the summer, giving excitement to the neighborhood and some character to the space, which has garnered a bit of local fame and draw for the market. Overington Park in Frankford boasts a Friends’ group full of knowledgeable horticulturists, who, lacking garden spaces in their own residences, take to the flowerbeds in the park and have created a gardener’s haven in a neighborhood fraught with economic instability and drug activity. Their vegetable garden, with its hand-written plant identifications, exemplifies how more personal stewardship of public lands can foster deeper citizen connection to it. Clark Park brings its West Philadelphia audience a myriad of public performances, such as Shakespeare in the Park and Reformation era jazz bands. Other parks located in more homogenous ethnic areas have the ability to
showcase cultural traditions through their parks. Campbell Square in Port Richmond hosts events put on by the local Polish Society and Fairhill Square in Kensington hosts an annual Puerto Rican Festival. This type of activity happens in less formal ways all the time.

When people have a connection to a public space, they feel entitled to use it and they do use it and tend to take care of it. Ultimately, the space’s maintenance and health leads to its further use and appreciation by its community. Friends’ groups demonstrate the efficacy of pooled resources and, especially empowering to groups in low-income areas, prove this power through tangible results.

The Friends’ group structure does, however, raise some fears of continuing the trend of privatization of public areas. It is the ideal that a Friends’ group is reflective of its community but in actuality some parks may just have four to five dedicated neighbors. It could be said that continued use and investment in the Friends’ group system would legitimize it and further its growth, but until that point it cannot be said that all community interests are truly helped by a Friends’ group. This raises the issue of Friends’ group composition. The Friends’ group system threatens to preserve the socio-economic disparity already present in the city. The person most readily available to join a group is typically a salaried employee with some amount of free time or someone who does not have to work outside the home. Richer areas have more neighbors with free time to devote to their parks. Friends’ groups in wealthier areas have better fundraising ability because their neighbors have more discretionary income and can donate more
money, or have connections to corporate donors. For example, Fitler Square has a private landscaping firm, a luxury that other parks cannot afford. Rittenhouse Square is able to charge larger membership fees for its Friends’ group, precluding participation of perhaps invested users of the park who cannot afford those fees.

Having an exclusive group that presides over the land can threaten the public nature of the area and lead to feelings of exclusion. It naturally falls that when you invest your sweat equity in an area you become more invested in the area, which is a positive for the park, but runs the danger of creating emboldened members whose investment in the park’s upkeep leads to their attempted restrictions of the public’s use of it. For example, members of the Rainbow de Colores Friends’ group put up “no dogs allowed” signs in their park when in fact it is an animal permissible zone and not the intention of PPR to alienate pet owning members of the public.

Similarly, in the summer of 2013, the Friends of Penn Treaty Park, against the neighborhood’s popular opinion, held a massive Craft Beer Festival with corporate sponsorship that brought in hundreds of people to the park, clogged traffic in the area, facilitated outdoor drinking and drunkenness and resulted in the destruction of part of the park’s lawn. The Festival, which brought in money for the Friends’ group’s activities, was priced so high that many residents in the neighborhood could not attend. The event served the purpose of the Friends’ group, but not the community it is supposed to serve. The composition of Friends’ groups also cannot be representative of the entire community. The Jefferson Square Friends’ group is composed almost entirely of white
residents who have not lived in the area very long. The group complained to PPR about the annual Jefferson Square Old Timers’ Festival, a predominantly African American attended event, raising racial tensions in the neighborhood.

Friends’ groups are made up of people. Even people motivated by the greater good cannot avoid personal preference, inter-neighbor relationships, and their own ideals from influencing decisions for the community. Because the government has a layer of removal from the community it is able to provide a more objective presence. What we can call the “human” element characterizes a Friends’ group system that by its nature is subjective and not without bias. Decisions impacting public domain are colored by the personal situation and preferences of the people making them. This human element can lead to infighting within the group and disputes that polarize communities rather than bring them together. It is a strain on the public that personal temperaments can affect the maintenance of public areas.

Placing an area under the domain of some is a means of privatization in a way and may take away from a public perception of entitlement to the space. When an area gets associated with a group it is no longer afforded the status of a genuinely public space. As what is deemed public shrinks and shrinks, preservation of traditional public spaces, our parks, our “Green Countrie Towne,” is paramount in countering the shrinking public sphere.

The Public Sphere
In 1860, Paris was being remade under the new republic and Napoleon’s appointed head of rebuilding; Baron Haussman. Baron Haussman conceived of the city as a space where private and public could collide and yield culture. “It’s not what people do or experience in their own lives that counts, but the external relationship of these acts to areas of indirect experience that is the focus,” was the justification Hausmann gave when explaining his own urban planning initiative of placing great importance in public spaces. His construction of lavish and large parkways, promenades, boulevards, public gardens and squares asserted belief in the prominent role of public space in the creation of city identity and inter-citizen interaction. Public parks represent some of the last bastions of public space as the shrinking of the public sphere continues, directly influenced by pervading neoliberal faith in the power of market regulation. A consideration of what is at stake and what the public sphere, and its reduction in size, means is crucial to any discussion of its management.

Public space is different from private space because of differences in who has access to it, what behavior is condoned inside it, and what type of rules exist around its use. The public sphere can encompass both public spaces in literal time and space, as well as intangible zones of universal access. Habermas defines the public sphere as a place “between civil society and the state,” and it is useful to remember this definition when considering what inherent politicization the public sphere holds.

As civilization has developed, ownership of property has remained a source of power. It is in the act of possession, the private holding, of property that the power lays.
Property, through no inherent industriousness of its own (high crop yield, high rent charging location), gives a holder power in the eyes of human society because it entitles its use to a select few or sole person to the exclusion of others. William Blackstone channeled enlightened Lockean ideology in the eighteenth century when he said, “there is nothing which so generally strikes the imagination, and engages the affections of mankind, as the right of property; or that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe.” The construct of private property by humans contrasts another form of ownership: public ownership. Public ownership is understood today to mean government owned zones accessible to the public. It is to the keen benefit of society and to the good of humanity to ensure the health of these areas always and a preservation of their defining character: universal access.

Much of the work in recent decades on public space and the public sphere (for example, Fraser 1990, Habermas, 2001, Mitchell, 2003), concerns itself with the limiting of the truly public nature of these spaces. As Smith and Low say in the introduction to their book, The Politics of Public Space: “The publicness of space in the broad geographical sense can be considered formal, at best, rather than real” Much of the loss of publicness in these areas (parks, streets, squares, atriums of shopping malls), stems from the space’s reconstruction through the past half century of modern capitalist society, media presence, social code, and government security reactions, in the form of increased policing and surveillance, to the events of 2001 and the threat of terrorism. CCTV, gated communities, presentation of a government ID for the obtaining of library cards are all
examples of privatization that encroach upon the public sphere. With each encroachment, the public sphere loses ground to the private sector or to merged private/public management. And at stake in this change is the cultural and societal impact that this space holds for our civilization. Smith and Low put it nicely when they say, “In this new century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space—not one of disuse, but of patterns of design and management that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity.”

There are many ways to limit public space without threatening its existence. Increased policing, as mentioned before, or restriction of access to a public space can weaken it. Increasing the influence of private parties in its territory also can threaten its integrity. Administrative changes in attitude about the public sphere - viewing it as a potential threat - have resulted in management changes. This can be seen in Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s zero tolerance policy, aimed at “reclaiming the public spaces of New York,” which was later popularized and globalized. This outlook has affected the design of public spaces in the modern era: “The reconfiguration of public spaces-reclaiming them from malignant uses- in the language of the urban right-has…become a central focus of urban redevelopment.”

It is not just administrative changes in attitude about public space that have affected its design and the way in which it is managed, it is also the need to involve the private sector in its upkeep that has added to the overall discussion of the threat to public areas caused by privatization. For example, Boston City Hall had been a hated public
space namely because of its poor design and so it was an underused area, but redesign efforts were not able to address encouragement of the publicness since new proposals had to include a private hotel, the source of the project’s funding. The result of privatization (private sponsorship) of public space is that the space is usurped and aligned to a private agenda fueled by capitalism and consumerism. Habermas cites the decline of the public sphere as a “product of corporate expansion, consumerism, and an increasingly privatized society.” The public realm is then at the mercy of actions of “corporations and developers more concerned with profit than public use…overzealous law enforcement agencies and urban authorities who value order over democratic expression, or modernist planners who value rationality over community.” The ultimate fear is that the public will form a new relationship with public property. A relationship that includes less a feeling of entitlement to space by nature of its publicness and more a reaction to any barriers that may be in place surrounding it set up by private interests. Private interests may create conditions of exclusion or limitation of public access a reality. Nowhere is this confrontation with the dwindling public sphere better considered than when looking at urban parklands. Public parks in the city represent an interesting position of being both “owned” property and uninhibited accepters of the public.

The question that arises with park Friends’ groups and the use of private non-profit conservancies is whether their support of the area could manifest itself in the exclusion of patrons or visible altering of the space. The Central Park Conservancy seems to be at the forefront of this consideration. It deemed the placement of a CPC plaque tantamount to a McDonald’s logo. Advertising where stewardship came from, if
not a government label, removes the veil of mystery that the routine preservation of these areas hold. Parkland is public domain, it belongs to anyone physically able to enter its boundaries, and how it is provided for and managed should not be highlighted.

Olmsted noted the sanctity of park space, an area meant to be free from commercial markings. That “a railroad station, a manufactory with chimneys and steam engines, advertising displays, wagons for commercial traffic, fast driving, gambling booths, a market place, though all of these may be seen in some town parks, are clearly there by mistake and want of proper consideration.”67 If the park were to slip in its public perception, falling into a category separate from uninhibited “romping territory,” the loss to the public sphere would be great indeed. In the Bridesburg neighborhood of Philadelphia, at Cione Recreation Center, local councilpersons’ names can be seen hung on banners from the batting cage during voting months, a seemingly harmless addition to the park landscape, yet, interpreted differently, a scary portent of a public that does not enforce the sanctity of public lands and their legacy. It is the belief of some scholars that “with abundance, Americans outgrew their collective need-even their capacity- for a public realm.”68 Certainly, the change in municipal administration to partnership with, and growing dependence on, the private sector supports this alarming notion.

Conclusion

SCHAD Thesis 2014
Neoliberalism has taken a prominent position in the discussion of modern governance: “At scales ranging from the supranational to the municipal, good governance is now widely accepted as entailing…economic policies favoring supply side innovation and competitiveness; decentralization, devolution, and attrition of political governance; deregulation and privatization of industry, land and public services; and replacing welfare with ‘workfarist’ social policies.” In a neoliberalist realm, all entities and individuals operate with an agenda of self-interest, yet there is belief that nonetheless the whole will benefit. In the eyes of a neoliberalist, the benefit always will come from privatization. “When the most strident members of the Competitive Enterprise Institute invoke the unnuanced tragedy of the commons, they advocate ‘privatization’ as the solution for everything from endangered species to the conditions of the central cities.” The fate of public services under this model of privatization is an unknown. However, what we do know is that if left unchecked its effect on the governance of public lands may lead to a future of municipal private park systems. On the surface, privatization seems to be a solution that frees custodianship from political attachment and moves its management into the rationality of the business world. As witnessed by the role of conservancies in conservation, private partnerships have worked and continue to work as a means for keeping lands open and maintained. However, by nature of their classification as private, these partnerships endanger the human construct of the public sphere.

Surely, a private gala fundraiser held on the historical grounds of the carriage house in Fairmount Park put on by FPC to raise funds for Fairmount Park conservation is a real answer to park stewardship in the modern era. Nevertheless, such events do bring
consequences to the character of the space. The very presence of an exclusive ball on parklands changes the way the land serves all. It is no longer a commons we all bring our cattle to graze at, or an area of equal social access allowing the classes to meet and co-exist to the edification of both parties. In that black-tie moment, it is a pleasant backdrop for a social engagement of benefactors able to afford over fifty dollar tickets.

Should the conservancies always keep the park systems’ public nature at the heart of their mission, this partnership system might not raise so many questions. If the property is held in public trust, upheld by the citizenry and stewarded by the servants of the public, the government, this space remains unattached and continues to possess the free quality of the public sphere that give the space its cultural meaning. As discussed above, private fundraising is effective and is ultimately beneficial to the physical maintenance of urban parks. However, it cannot be said that private fundraising for public spaces has no affect on the public sphere. The damage that has been done to the public sphere through this type of interaction with the private sector, and which will continue to be done if not monitored carefully, is the depletion of the “language of the public realm itself” by limiting the space it speaks on and therefore narrowing use of its vocabulary.

The urban parks are the last frontier. They are the last unchained lands that imply possibility to all those that interact with them. Privatization of such lands cannot be the solution for their upkeep because it will alter the spaces’ meaning in the eyes of the public. It is paramount that the public character of these areas remains, that the public
character of public lands should be preserved above all else. If we do not have a public
realm how do we know that we are citizens? Presence in a public sphere alongside other
members of a greater collective allows the people to place themselves in a greater system.
Presence in the park shows that you are a citizen who can recognize other inhabitants as
citizens as well.

Space and the organization of free territory are, as it turns out, important for how
we conceptualize the world we live in; they help us to legitimize our created societal
organization structures through public support. Humans are informed by their distance
from other humans and also by other human’s claims on property. This leads most
importantly to inter-human understanding of ownership and how the ownership rights of
others affect them. Interaction is predicated on these rules that all are ultimately land
based: “Geography and the territorial organization of society get their importance from
the facts that social relations are determined largely by physical distances and that social
stability is insured when human beings are rooted in the soil.”

Just as the public sphere aids our self-identification as citizens, it also has
historically informed our construction of democracy. David Harvey discusses the
political economy of public spaces, and notes that it is in these spaces that the urban
dweller is confronted with city life. What the everyday person absorbs from their
surroundings is done so in the public realm, and that surely influences where they see
themselves and how they “act politically within it.” The person is given more value as
a consumer rather than a citizen when privatization takes hold. Public lands have the
power to fight that distinction if they remain in the public sphere. The parks’ major services are bringing nature and people in. Parks, as Phil Ginsburg, Recreation and Park General Manager for the San Francisco park district puts it, “are the great equalizers.”

All citizens are indistinguishable in the eyes of the park. Preservation of this public character will be tasked to the efforts of Parks and Recreation departments around the country as they adapt to pursue funding sources. Other Parks and Recreation departments would be wise to look at the solution found in the triangular structure of Philadelphia’s park stewardship program. The current system in use by the Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation may be the best way to preserve the public sphere while embracing the inevitable inclusion of the private sector. Friends’ groups are the ultimate grassroots organization that may infuse public space with not only community involvement, but also community creation, combating some of the privatizing trends the modern era brings. Not only can Friends’ groups play a crucial role in physical maintenance, taking some of the burden off the government agency, they ensure the spaces live up to their cultural potential. Admittedly, Friends’ groups bring in their own brand of privatization; they create exclusive groups that may over claim public areas even if the intent is to act for the betterment of many. Inherently decisions made with some form of personal attachment will be biased. However, a counter-balance to the potential for overreaching and personal bias of the Friends’ groups is provided by the PPR, as it is the ultimate arbiter of what can occur in the parks. The role of the PPR therefore provides a check on the potential for privatization. The Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation retains the power to veto all physical change petitions made by the
Friends’ groups, it clears the permitting for all festivities and it serves as a reminder of the space’s ultimate owner. The park system in Philadelphia gets to reap the benefits, such as community making, wrought from personalized stewardship by the Friends’ groups. Friends’ groups also provide the authentic addition of charm that adds to the narrative of neighborhood parks, places that existed before the current residents and that will exist well after they are gone.

Ultimately at stake in the wake of neoliberalist practice and the endorsement of the private sector as a partner for public use is the creation of an increasingly privatized public environment that “ha[s] reduced the ability of Americans to construct communities, and ha[s] diminished the degree to which Americans of different races and classes engage in direct social interaction.”74 The Friends’ group with both its proven and potential ability to foster community connection seems to be the best tool to reverse this process.

Though it is the physical presence of free spaces themselves that carry civilization’s collective spirit forward, we cannot forget the good that improved maintenance of parks does for preserving the element of nature in the city. The presence of this nature must be fiercely protected if we are to remember both the wonder of our planet and the human obligation to preserve it. To the urban dweller, contact with nature may only be facilitated by the opportunities provided in public lands. The scale of this nature may not always be to the caliber of the ancestral landscape parks, but its presence, at any size, nonetheless has an impact. “Nature may not be inherently good or healthful-
having more parks will not cure all our ills or fundamentally readjust society’s most important power imbalances—but landscapes that feature natural elements at least give opportunities to connect to the world, to appreciate and even celebrate their environmental contexts, their independence, perhaps even their mortality.”

What a public space provides, regardless of its location, is the freedom of movement. Not only the uninhibited activity of one, or some, but many. The park is a zone of possibility and chance that facilitates interaction, neighborly or random, that recalls what we know to be societal. Idyllic rolling meadows, or small lot as the urban park marches on we find that their aesthetics make us joyful, but their character makes us free. To know these spaces only enriches life and reminds a society clinging to the home sphere, that there is community and good will outside their doors. Arcadia may be the local square at the corner, a larger park that was the destination of after school hangouts with people-watching accompanied by juvenile commentary, or the most epic jungle gym light years away that took parental convincing to visit. To maintain and cultivate our nation’s urban park systems is vital to the health and welfare of its citizens. Philadelphia’s Department of Parks and Recreation, in conjunction with the financial backing of a private non-profit, and supported by its Friends’ groups, possesses the management system most able to oversee this maintenance in the 21st century.
Endnotes


SCHAD Thesis 2014


SCHAD Thesis 2014


SCHAD Thesis 2014


56 Gia Fiagi, Chicago Park district chief of staff. “Philly Parks Future Forum” (private panel discussion, hosted by City Parks Alliance, Moore College of Design, Philadelphia, October 23rd, 2014)

57 “Philly Parks Future Forum” (private panel discussion, hosted by City Parks Alliance, Moore College of Design, Philadelphia, October 23rd, 2014)


SCHAD Thesis 2014


91 "Philly Parks Future Forum" (private panel discussion, hosted by City Parks Alliance, Moore College of Design, Philadelphia, October 23rd, 2014)


References


SCHAD Thesis 2014