“The Origin of Parks”

by John Brinckerhoff Jackson

in **Discovering the Vernacular Landscape**

The Origin of Parks

Once cherished by citizens as a public work of art, source of wholesome pleasure, glimpse of unspoiled nature; admired as the democratic equivalent of the royal garden, the American city park, after little more than a century, has lately fallen on evil days. We no longer love it as we did. The prosperous neighborhoods the park did so much to foster now see its presence as a social and economic liability, and its design, its use, its very existence have all become matters of angry debate. How many crestfallen designers there must be! And crestfallen recreationists and social counselors and administrators who find themselves having to reappraise their respective philosophies and come up with fresh and very different justifications for their work.

I hope they start by reexamining their ideas about the origins of the public park, retracing its genealogy. If they do they will discover that they have ignored the oldest and most popular kind of play space in favor of the aristocratic garden.

The current interpretation of the history of the park is neatly expressed in the article "Park and Playground" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—an article, incidentally, written by a playground expert and in its way a gem of misinformation. "The first parks were grants of the royal lands for the enjoyment of the people," it says; "modern parks are gifts from the people to themselves." The role of the royal park or garden was *in fact* briefly as follows: the first designed parks dating from the sixteenth century were formal and elaborate gardens with small wooded areas created and set aside for the delectation of the court, though on occasion open to a limited element of the public. Early royal parks or gardens were extremely formal, even architectural in design, emphasizing what recreationists deprecatingly call passive enjoyment, but it was the so-called picturesque landscape park, the product of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, that inspired the design of the public park in America and Europe. The works of Strauch and Downing and Bushnell and Olmsted were essentially modern versions of the private English country estate laid out as a "picturesque" landscape: a composition of lawns, placid bodies of water, artfully located groves of trees, a would-be natural topography affording occasional glimpses of the wider environment. We know that; but we sometimes forget that this particular kind of park was designed to provide contact with nature, that it was expensive to lay out and maintain, that it too produced "passive enjoyment," and that as a work of art it had to be treated with respectful care; correct behavior was essential. In other words, the landscaped park, despite its apparent informality, called for a public which was aware of the esthetic features of the design, was in search of a contact with nature, and was socially disciplined.

When Olmsted and his contemporaries both here and abroad produced the first large city parks they naturally planned in terms of those restraints. The "picturesque," natural beauty of the composition was emphasized, the rural, almost pastoral character carefully maintained, and a code of public de-

meanor strictly enforced—as indeed it still is in many European city parks. Contemporary critics of Olmsted like to attack his social philosophy. Robert Moses, for instance, refers to him as "an aristocratic Versailles estate landscaper, a notorious WASP in his social sympathies." It is a pointless accusation. Central Park from its first years was used by all classes. Early observers noted with pleased surprise that numbers of working-class citizens—"the poor seamstress and journeyman"—were there, along with the rich and powerful.

Why were they surprised? Not because they thought that the poor were out of place in Central Park—though that is what the class-conscious park reformer would like to think—but because they believed, with some justification, that there were other places for recreation that the poor might well prefer.

And in fact there were. Mid-nineteenth-century New York still contained areas offering a much livelier, a much less formal kind of entertainment, and a much less structured environment. Staten Island was a popular resort, and so were the Elysian Fields in Hoboken; and there were other locations, untouched by the garden architect, along the beaches and waterfronts and in the unbuilt areas in Manhattan. When the nineteenth-century park enthusiast praised the upper-class aspect of the city park he did so because he assumed the existence and availability of other kinds of recreation.

That is to say, he was aware of something which the contemporary park expert and recreationist has conveniently forgotten: that well into the nineteenth century every community, large or small, in Europe as well as America, retained sizeable areas of land where the common people, and particularly adolescents, could exercise and play and enjoy themselves, and at the same time participate in community life.

The existence of these playgrounds is vouched for by history as well as by tradition. Folklorists find evidence in village after village that a portion of the churchyard and the site of any pre-Christian shrine or temple were commonly identified with youthful sport and games. Some historians suggest that the association between games and places having a traditional sacred character derives from a remote period when the young men of the village were assigned to guard those sites and fight off neighboring invaders. By the Middle Ages the convention was well established: certain spots, usually near the church, were informally set aside for sports and games. But that is not all: these sports and games, deriving as they did from armed conflict with outsiders, retained a violent, competitive nature, were based on notions of territoriality and community status, and were little concerned with the design of the terrain in question or with "contact with nature." The games were rough and undisciplined, constantly denounced by the Church and the Crown; but quite evidently very popular among adolescents as a way of "defending" the community, letting off steam, and achieving personal renown.

Nor were such areas and such sports confined to the village. Every medieval town possessed stretches of land outside the walls, often along the banks of a river, where young or active townspeople could enjoy themselves—what the French call *terrains vagues*—pieces of land not cultivated or built upon. Francis I set aside a stretch of river bank in Paris for the recreation of university students, and in 1222, so we read, the young citizens of London "kept games of defense and wrestling near unto the Hospital of St. Giles in the Field, where they challenged and had the mastery of men in the suburbs and other commoners."

New Englanders, despite the disapproval of the Puritan clergy, hunted, fished, played football on the beach, competed in violent sports with neighboring villages, and even frolicked on the common. As for the southern passion for nonestablishment competitive sports, either in the backyard of taverns or along the road in the open country, there is ample historical evidence of its existence.

The advent of the park movement in the second half of the nineteenth century produced innumerable designed parks in towns and cities throughout the United States, but the popularity of the unstructured playground and of unstructured competitive sports persisted. Baseball in its less formal guise, football as a kind of mass confrontation, rodeos, mock war games took place not in the town park but in the so-called grove outside. The landscape architect F. A. Waugh wrote an attractive description in 1889 of the contrast between the formal, overstructured, small-town park, deserted and forlorn, and the much used grove out in the country near the river.

> I have in mind one particular western village of more than usual culture and enterprise. . . . This town has expended many hundreds of dollars in making a park on forty acres of valuable land. One corner is always kept mowed for a baseball field, and this is the extent of the uses found for the park. Quite as near the town, on the opposite side, are uncommonly fine stretches of natural timber, a beautiful river, suitable for boating and bathing, some hills and ravines, which would make a delightful park. These woods, used otherwise only for pasture, constitute The Grove; and to them comes the crowd for the soldiers' reunion, the picnic, the circus, and so forth. . . . The existence of the park shows the public spirit and liberality of the citizens. The general favor in which the grove is held demonstrates the unspoiled instinct for sylvan pleasures.[1]

Why have we so completely forgotten this once popular and lively tradition? Why have our parks ignored this important social function: the integration of the young into the life of the community? For one thing, the grove (as the American equivalent of the *terrain vague*) has vanished from the American scene. The expansion of towns and cities has obliterated it and covered it with houses and streets, and tastes in recreation have radically changed. But current philosophies of recreation and park design are also to blame. The persistence of the belief that what the public wants (or ought to have) is

"contact with nature" in a professionally designed park, that sport is exclusively a matter of teams and rules and expertise has meant the elimination of ad hoc playgrounds for adolescents and the public disapproval of any display of risk or competitiveness: twin nightmares that haunt the liberal social reformer.

And in the meantime the older city parks have become the victims of reduced budgets, deteriorated neighborhoods, persistent vandalism. They are misused by undesirable and even dangerous elements, and as a consequence less and less used by those who need them. The value of parks is potentially as great as ever. The formal, structured park or garden, the park as work or art for passive enjoyment is essential as an urban amenity, particularly in the downtown, working area. The less elaborate, more "natural" neighborhood park has a valuable role to play in the lives of those who need contact with nature and in the lives of older people and children. But is it not time that we acknowledged the need for a third variety: the ample, unstructured, unbeautiful, multipurpose public playground where adolescents can assert themselves and become social beings, defending and serving some youthful concept of the community?

The question is by no means idle; there are in fact signs, still inconspicuous, that we are beginning to try to answer it. Many western cities, plagued by the misbehavior of a restless and mobile younger generation, are creating sports parks. Parks, that is to say, which are designed for sports of mobility: bicycling, skateboarding, motorcycling, all-terrain vehicles, and even in some cases for skiing and hang gliding. They are expensive, unsightly, and still in the experimental stage. Anything more unlike the conventional park it would be hard to imagine: noisy, deliberately artificial in its man-made topography, used by a boisterous and undisciplined public, and dedicated to the violent expenditure of energy and to hitherto unheard of contacts with nature, the sports park seems to repudiate and make a mockery of everything the word *park* has stood for. On the other hand, it may eventually mature and give the word a wider and more contemporary meaning: the park as a public, open-air space where we can acquire self-awareness as members of society and awareness of our private relationship to the natural environment.