

Beyond Pragmatism: Challenging the Generic Design of Public Parks in the Contemporary City

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This paper explores the role of public parks in contemporary cities. It argues that the economy of cities, consumption culture and regeneration processes have contributed to the development of particular design principles of public spaces that place the user at the bottom of the food chain. The contribution of branding, marketing and regeneration processes to landscape design culture is not to offer a refuge from the modern city but rather it enhances the visual buzz. Exploring this approach to contemporary open spaces in the city, and defining some of its underlying design principles, the paper calls for a counter approach – the round public place – that might be able to offer more complex, dynamic public spaces in cities. Challenging the contemporary approach to landscape design is viewed as essential. In an age of control and consumption, public parks are still places of freedom and choice, and are spaces that we should be fighting for their design and being.

... at certain times of the year, the land is green, at others, yellow or brown or black. And in certain places it is red, the color of clay or spilled of blood. This, however, depends on what has been planted or what has not yet been planted, on what sprung up unaided and died simply because it reached its natural end.

Jose Saramago,
Raised from the Ground, 2012, p. 1)

The landscape is everywhere. Its colours, smells, and changes are a harsh reminder to us, humans, that we are passers-by, guests. And so, the discussion of the landscape is rooted in the temporal, and the changeable, the image of today's landscape will look different tomorrow. Every fallen leaf, every shrub that has died, the trees that will reach their height decades after planting in the city square, are reminders of time and death. But this temporariness is also a blessing as

it allows humans to observe and recognize change and growth. Despite the centrality of landscape to humanity, physically and mentally, landscape is not accessible to everyone. For the city's people, viewing nature implies a long drive away to the countryside. Thus, for those living in the city, the public space, the artificial and planned park, is the daily encounter and contact with the natural world.

Authorities invest a considerable part of their public capital in shaping the public spaces and parks as a leisure and living space for their residents. The justification for these public investments is that the residents of the city need to break from the daily race of modern life, which are based on calculations and the reduction of qualitative to quantitative values. Modernity, states Georg Simmel, is based on the fiscal nature of money and this affects the way we manage our lives and base them on 'punctuality, calculability, exactness'

(Simmel, 1950, p. 413). Yet, as he further explains, this exactness is needed as it enables the coexistence of many people with different interests, whose relationships create together a multi-part organism that would collapse in tremendous chaos without a forced precision. The result is the formation of an urban man, who runs a life which is dictated by clock and timetables, detached from seasonal changes and the regeneration of nature. The increased modern demand for precision has placed the public park as a key place of refuge for urban dwellers, allowing individuals and groups to enjoy greenness and the colourfulness of seasonal flowers.

Public parks, so central to the wellbeing of a city's residents, are not merely a beautiful setting and places of green, they are also a representation of the capital of the city and the way it decides to manage it. Public parks, ideally open and free to all, are mostly funded, regulated and managed by the municipality. In most Western countries the provision of public spaces has become a public service and is accepted as a key to the well-being of modern societies and thus part of the array goods and services whose adequate provision should be secured by the state (Carmona *et al.*, 2008, p. 68). Yet, this approach is challenged in contemporary times by other models that are based on the increased involvement of other stakeholders such as the private sector, community organizations and interest groups (Carmona, 2008, p. 69). How has this expanded management model of public spaces affected the design of public spaces and in turn the user experience? The main argument in this article is that the varied models of public parks management have altered the design of spaces to meet other needs such as branding, security and political interests before the experience of the user. This result is a pragmatic approach to design, which contributes to the over-regulation, overdesign, and the increased consumption facilities in the public parks.

In exploring this argument, this article continues in three parts. The first part presents the

public park in the context of urban economy and management models. The second part addresses the pragmatic approach that characterizes the design of public parks. The adoption of the pragmatic approach contributes to the development of a *flat* space (similar to the flat character in literature), a two-dimensional open space that does not offer a refuge from the buzz of the city but serves to enhance the image of the place. The third and final part aims at challenging the pragmatic design of *flat* public parks, suggesting approaching public parks as *round* spaces, as places that offer a variety of features, places that evolve and change, that do not imitate the buzz of the city or offer a striking image. In the neoliberal era, during which it is impossible to escape from the daily consumer reality, the public space, the park, must offer a different scale of values.

The Public Space and the Urban Economy

The evolution of *public* parks in the city of modern times is associated with the gradual process of opening the leisure and hunting spaces of the royal families and local aristocrats to the public (Garvin and Brands, 2011). Kensington Gardens in London, the Tiergarten in Berlin, Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Łazienki Park in Warsaw, are just a few examples of royal parks which permitted access to the public. This significant change in the public domain is associated with the French Revolution, when the French monarchy was opened to the public. Following France, other royal houses throughout Europe were soon under pressure to act accordingly and open their assets to the public.

Other new cities, with no royal tradition, have developed their own parks. The design of the new parks sought to evoke a 'natural' landscape appearance of asymmetric composition in contrast to the axial geometry of earlier Renaissance and Baroque landscapes. This approach was named as 'picturesque' and was widespread from the 1840s until well into the early twentieth century (*Ibid.*,

pp. 15–33; Hunt, 1992). This development of parks for the general public should be viewed in the context of the accelerated urbanization processes of the nineteenth century, which exacerbated environmental problems of overcrowding, illness, pollution and sanitation, and created an increasing need to allocate land resources to parks in the city. One of the most prominent examples of these processes is the plan of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, who sought to transform Paris from an old and congested city that suffered from malfunction into a modern and industrial city (Weeks and Martin, 1999). Haussmann's plan included the creation of new streets, squares, parks and public spaces, close to the centres of growth of the private market. Haussmann emphasized that public areas in the city, especially parks, serve the residents and stimulate economic development activities nearby. Another prominent project, which is also related to economic thinking, is Central Park in New York, designed to encourage investors to build in the less populated areas of Manhattan. In 1857, it was decided to allocate a large land reserve (about 3.4 square kilometres) and its plan was entrusted to Frederick Law Olmsted and architect Calvert Vaux, whose design was influenced by Joseph Paxton's design for Birkenhead Park in north-west England, the first publicly funded civic park in the world. Central Park offered passive and active recreation spaces, and emphasis was given to designing scenes that mimic nature (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992).

These celebrated landscape projects and in particular the development of public parks in the United States and England strengthened the planners' belief that the existence of leisure spaces guarantees the mental and physical health of the city's residents. Thus, from the nineteenth century, public parks became an important component of the modern urban and metropolitan system. The role of Parks and public spaces was to support social activities, including improving personal welfare and public health, fostering civil society and

creating a living environment within a regulated and planned framework.

Today, the development of parks and public spaces is viewed as a 'vital component in strategies of urban regeneration' (Roberts *et al.*, 2017), city marketing (Dinnie, 2011), neighbourhood renewal (Hwang *et al.*, 2015), social inclusion (Harvey, 1996) and so forth; in short, parks are required to accommodate an increasingly complex range of expectations" (Carmona *et al.*, 2008, p. 71). Thus, for example, on the social level, parks are intended to serve as a meeting point and a place for contact between various social groups in the city; in terms of health and climate, parks are perceived as environments that mitigate the urban heat, and they make an important contribution to the comfort of the human in the city; parks are also viewed as a means to enhance image and place identity. Today, as in the past, parks and landscape development have a clear meaning and influence in relation to land values in the city, which is an incentive for entrepreneurs and authorities to invest in these public products. This dynamic has resulted in the expansion of the management models of public spaces, with the market and community involved as active stakeholders.

Management has a tremendous influence on the design park itself. All management models of public spaces, whether undertaken by the public or the private sector, include four key dimensions (Carmona *et al.*, 2008, pp. 66–67): (a) regulation of uses and conflicts between users (Ben Joseph and Szold, 2005); (b) maintenance; (c) investment; (d) coordination with individuals and organizations in intervention in the public sphere. These dimensions are being taken into account differently by: 1. the state-centred model, i.e. public bodies which usually ensures a desire to provide a solution to the public interest; 2. The market-oriented model, i.e. managed by private entities, in which public development are funded by private resources; 3. the community centre model, based on voluntary and community organizations, a model designed

to reduce the gap between users and service providers (*ibid.*, pp. 71–79). The growing involvement of private and community stakeholders in managing public space is contested. It has been argued that these models may lead to gentrification processes and social consequences that may result of rising housing prices and the exclusion of weaker populations. Furthermore, these relations, between the city's economy and public open space, reinforced the pessimism about the existing management policy of the public space (Kohn, 2004; Mitchell, 1995), especially on issues related to the quality of daily life in the public sphere and the distribution of budgets between the different areas of the city.

In sum, both the complex range of roles of public space and parks play in contemporary city, along with the alterations in the public spaces' management models have had a far-reaching impact on the design of the public spaces, and in turn on the experience of the user. To accommodate all the needs above, the design of contemporary parks has distanced itself from the original vision of supporting urban health and adopted a pragmatic and utilitarian approach.

Pragmatism as a Generator of Public Space in the Neoliberal Era

Public parks and spaces based on the state's management model and/or the public sector tend to be based on a pragmatic approach, expressed in three dimensions: *programme, design and maintenance* (Hatuka *et al.*, 2017).

In terms of *programme*, pragmatism is evident in the organization which is characterized by a multiplicity of stimuli and facilities that constantly activate the users. The physical presence of the facilities and the allocation of a space cell for each use contribute to the creation of an inflexible space, suitable for targeted audiences. The delineation of the gaze and the activity, the channelling of the movement and the constant stimulation in the form of sound-visual noises are repro-

ducing the intensity of consumption areas in the city. In this sense, public parks offer no alternative to the city's buzz, they do not offer serenity, nor do they provide a respite from the intensive daily life but, instead, could be viewed as a continuation of the urban consumer experience.

In terms of *design*, pragmatism creates a dependent relationship between programme, economic interests and form. First, the design language of the public spaces seeks to provide a response to the various activities and is it therefore is confined by the uses. This state of affairs results in the delimitation of areas of activity as well as areas of vegetation within the open areas. Second, design language is also affected by the increased need to use public parks as a means of branding the locale. This results in a two-dimensional design, dominated by artificial forms and materials. The purpose of the flat space is to provide the best image of the place from above or from a distance. Third, together with the above and also with the increased control and supervision of public areas, parks are designed as *flat spaces*, with a limited quantity of trees, with seasonal flowers or meadows, which allow to surveillances practices better monitor users' activities.

Underlying the pragmatic approach is the economic logic that seeks to save costs and to increase the gains of the stakeholders. As a result, *maintenance* becomes a key factor in assessing the quality of the design and materials used. Artificial materials require less maintenance than a garden with vegetation and trees. This approach is even more dramatic in the case of market-state model, where 'maintenance contracts to outcomes rather than process' (Carmona *et al.*, 2008, p. 76). That is to say, for example, that a park would get cleaned when service is needed and not on a fixed basis, thus saving resources.

The outcome of the pragmatic approach to landscape design is that public spaces and parks suffer from *Over design, Horizontalness and Ostentatiousness*. *Over design* refers to public parks or gardens that tend to be meticu-

lously designed, yet overwhelm the users with sound and visual noise; they are thus far removed from their original role as spaces of refuge and tranquillity. *Horizontalness* refers to the trend of designing spaces as two-dimensional, using a design language that ignores local context and climate and tends to prefer artificial materials. Finally, *Ostentatiousness* refers to the use of public spaces as a branding tool, which serves economic and political development trends.

These features have become a widespread phenomenon in the world. The idea of branding public places reflects a shift from the perception of a place as an arena of cultural and social affairs to its conceptualization as a product whose purpose is to drive the market and generate value. With the development of thinking about places as a product that needs to be marketed in order to compete for an increasing share of consumers – businesses, tourists, investors, skilled workers and quality populations – cities can use the branding process as a means of mobilizing interested parties in the city around a new competitive identity, and to communicate a unified and attractive message to an intended audience. Public spaces play a central role in the transmission of these messages. Through the public sphere, associations can be promoted in the individual's mind, and these associations can be manipulated in order to make them more positive (Kotler, 2002; Sevin, 2014). Thus, the design of parks, gardens and squares now focuses on managing the image system that gives identity to the place by creating a distinctive character for it.

To be sure, the pragmatic approach to landscape design should be viewed as the superficialization of modernist ideas (Donald, 1999; Gold, 2013) in the spirit of capitalism and the consumption-oriented, target-oriented, utilitarian culture. Without a doubt, contemporary parks, gardens and squares look 'shinier', but what is the experience they offer? Is it possible to challenge the current trends of landscape's design? Is it possible to avoid the plastic and rubber industry in squares

and public parks? Is this the 'nature' that city planners wish to develop in the city? Do the inhabitants of the city benefit from these surroundings, accept them as a decree of fate? And finally, is it possible to create open spaces that are not bounded by activities, fences and details but offer mental freedom and allow subjective interpretation?

Less is More – Calling for the Design of the Round Spaces

Public parks and gardens are apparently the last arena in which new reality can be created (by awareness and struggle): one that opposes the consumption agenda (Clarke and Bradford, 1998; Clarke, 2003). However, the promotion of a different agenda should begin with the recognition that the public parks and public spaces in the city tend to be designed as flat, visually loud, and offer a meaningless image. A starting point for searching for a different scale of values may be to search for a space that challenges the pragmatic agenda, the *round space* (Hatuka *et al.*, 2017).

Borrowing from E.M. Forster (1974 [1927]), who defined flat and round characters in literature, *round space* is a landscape that offers variety of features. It is complex, developing, changing, and has depths that surprise the users. This is in contrast to the *flat space*, which is characterized by a dominant image, a prominent use, or a cluster of uses that integrate into a two-dimensional, rather uncomplicated space.

The round space has a rich assemblage of attributes, some of which do not necessarily fit with one another. Sometimes it is open space, sometimes closed, sometimes exposed and sometimes tangled: it is an inconsistent, conflicted space. The round space is also dynamic, not fixed by artificial means designed by an architect (e.g. lighting or mechanical elements) but could be adjusted by the users who influence it. It is a space that allows a range of personal and group experiences that are not defined by the 'omniscient' landscape architect, the politician

Landscape design in cities – the complex range of roles of public space and parks has had a dramatic impact on their design.



1. Kensington Gardens, London (Photo: Kyller Costa Gorgônio, Flickr)



2. Łazienki Park, Warsaw. (Photo: Michael Jacobson)



3. Central Park, New York. (Photo: Lawrence's Lenses, Flickr)



4. Boston Common, Boston. (Photo: Michael Jacobson)



6. Grand Canal Square, Dublin. (Photo: William Murphy, Flickr)



5. Superkilen Park, Copenhagen. (Photo: Fred Romero, Flickr)



8. Midron Yafso Park, Tel Aviv- Jaffa. (Photo: Tali Hatuka)



7. La Promenade du Paillon, Nice. (Photo: Hadas Saaroni)

or the market, but by the user. The design of the circular space is based on a wide range of direct means of characterization, such as uses, and physical design. However, it will also include indirect means of characterization such as symbols, repetitive motifs, contrasts, analogies, and ceremonial elements. To be sure, the round space can be minimalist in its design language, but it is never flat. Its complexity is built up by its aggregate use of characterizations. It is important to note that the round space could be developed anywhere, in a small garden and in a spacious park.

Further, the idea of round space does not mean eclecticism or pluralism, but rather the formulation of a complex language that transforms the pragmatic design and the rigid division between the various uses into a complex and flexible spatial design. Indeed, landscape is never static, it is formed. Therefore, the basis of any ecosystem is the possibility of development, growth, change. In this sense, the architect does not 'reinvent' the landscape, but rather edits it, intervenes in a way that allows nature, or the garden in the city, to emerge without the need to restrain and control it all the time.

Thus, the round space is based on three basic principles (Hatuka *et al.*, 2017):

(a) *Programme: Placing the Experience of the User in the Centre.* This implies designing public parks and spaces as the landscape arenas for personal interpretation. The round space is about reducing planning and design efforts; it is about enhancing visual silence and cultivating experiences of discovery, curiosity, personal ceremony, boredom, which might boost a different look at the familiar. In the round space, nature is a major actor, and the park, like nature, could be a place where you can get lost, break away. The implementation of this approach requires the renunciation of an activity-oriented programme, the quantification of areas and uses, and the adoption of a qualitative programme based on the creation of a range of landscape

experiences, which are multi-age and multi-purpose. All activities in the round space – for example, stay, convergence, intimacy, disengagement, ritual – are defined by the users themselves, both at the individual and group level.

(b) *Design: The Landscape as a Multi-Dimensional Space.* This principle is based on the use of various characterization methods, combinations of materials and vegetation, in order to activate the senses. This could be achieved with the following: (1) framing landscape with various tools (narrative, material, vegetation, geometry); (2) enhancing experiences of discovery and concealment by using a three-dimensional approach to the landscape design; (3) addressing the dynamics of place to include, seasonal, light, climate, and movements changes; (4) Activating senses – hearing, touching, smelling. This principle also seeks to restore to climate comfort in space, the use with natural materials, the three-dimensional design of parks, so that the landscape will also be able to provide spatial complexity and will not be seen at all in one glance.

(c) *Management: The Landscape as a Space of Well-Being.* This principle is based on the development of an urban landscape that focuses on the welfare of the residents, rather the economy of cities. This means planning parks based on long-term thinking, it also implies that the professionals have an active role in challenging contemporary affairs and they must be able to think and fight for a design that serves the needs of the residents of the city. This does not mean pleasing the public but placing their needs and the idea of public parks as a refuge place as a priority. Bringing back nature to the city, minimalistic design, and distancing parks from the consumer culture are fundamental principles in achieving this goal.

The starting point adopting these ideas and in the development of the round space

is normative: placing user and nature at the centre. The architects, politicians or entrepreneurs are secondary players in the formation of these spaces in the city. Every point in the space that offers a disconnection, however temporary, from the rushing and flooding experience of the digital age, from the ceaseless noise generated by the modern life, will help promote the well-being of the resident. These 'pockets' of boredom and creativity, imagination and choice, are alternatives to planning 'steroids parks', that will advance the natural and cultural ecosystem of our cities as a whole – a system of events that are not fixed and defined in space and time.

Planning the round space starts with a deep familiarity of context. An acquaintance that transcends the technical familiarity of traffic, interfaces, uses and designated land. Pragmatic technical knowledge will merely produce a pragmatic development based on a formal, flat, showcase language. In contrast, the planning of the round space, which is based on the analysis of existing and future experiences, in order to create a continuum of new experiences and observations on the spot, requires another, phenomenological analysis which addresses issues of culture, space, temporality and climate. The analysis will offer answers to questions such as: How can the historical narrative of the place contribute to a different view of the local culture and landscape? How does the landscape experience provide a diverse response at different times and enable user interpretation? How can the physical characteristics of the place contribute to the development of the three-dimensionality of the landscape experience? What are the characteristics of the local climate and how can they can be used to promote visual serenity?

The answer to these questions, borrowing from Georges Perec (1997), is not try to find too quickly a definition or a concept for a landscape, garden, park. First, there is a need to make a list of what we see. Conduct a census of what is certain. Determine basic distinctions, for example, between what is a

park, a garden, or a public space, and what is not a garden, a park and a public space; and also remember, as José Saramago wrote, that what we have most on earth is landscape. And there is no doubt that the landscape preceded man. Thus, despite the control, regulation and management, the landscape is everyone's. Even today, in an age of control and consumption, public parks are still places of freedom and choice, and are they spaces for whose appearances and being that we should be fighting.

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