



Our Green and Pleasant Land

The importance of parks in regeneration

By Julia Thrift

Close your eyes and think of a park... For most of us, the word 'park' is incredibly evocative. It instantly brings to mind powerful images, images that relate back to our very earliest years, our earliest experiences. Julia Thrift considers the decline of the English park and what can be done to revive our green spaces.

Asked to think of a park and the chances are – especially if you were brought up in England – that the place you think of is a traditional urban park, a place that was created in the 19th or early 20th century.

The park you see in your mind's eye probably has railings around the edge, a bandstand in the middle, and rose-gardens or well-tended flower beds throughout: the epitome of civic pride. Sadly, however, many of those once beautiful parks have now declined. Throughout the country, bandstands have become derelict, cafes and sports pavilions have been closed, and flowerbeds lie empty except for weeds.

England's public parks were once the envy of the world – one of our most successful exports. For the last few decades, however, they have been allowed to decline – not dramatically, but as a result of small cuts in their maintenance budgets, year after year, after year. The cumulative result of several decades of budget cuts is that trees and shrubs become overgrown, cafes and pavilions

become derelict and are then demolished, and parks that were once welcoming and full of people become empty and scary.

When we close our eyes and think of a park, the place that most of us think of – a traditional park, that is well maintained and full of people – is increasingly rare. Nevertheless, the traditional park, a place that is funded and managed by the local council for the local people, retains a strong grip on our psyches. It's a powerful part of our culture but one which is perhaps now constraining our thinking about what a park is, and one which needs to make way for new paradigms if the parks of the future are to fulfil their role as powerful tools for regeneration.

CABE Space, part of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), has launched a Manifesto for Better Public Spaces, a ten-point plan calling on ordinary people, local and national politicians, local authorities and businesses to band together, to rethink how we want to use our green spaces in the future, and reclaim England's city parks, squares and open spaces for the people.

Let's, for the sake of argument, think about the archetypal park as an Edwardian place, a place that was in its prime in the years before the First World War. And let's think about what sort of place it was, and how it met the needs of society.



Well, 100 years ago, before the widespread development of suburbia, many people lived in very overcrowded conditions and only the affluent could afford a garden. So for most people, the park was the only garden they had, and an important place to get away from unhealthy overcrowded housing.

Nowadays, however, in some parts of the north, we have the opposite problem: instead of overcrowding we have many places where there are too few people, where whole streets are being knocked down and just grassed over. This is a something that will require radical new ways of thinking about the purpose and form of parks and other green spaces.

And the things that children play with have changed too, in the last 100 years, from hoops to skateboards. And at the other end of life, 100 years ago those who were lucky enough to retire were probably in poor health and unable to be very active, unlike today's older people, many of whom can expect several decades of active retirement.



So our traditional parks were created to meet the needs of a society that, in many respects, no longer exists today. This is not, however, an argument that we should get rid of all our wonderful Edwardian and Victorian parks. They are an important part of our cultural heritage and the majority of them should be maintained, and maintained to a very high standard.

However, we do, perhaps, need to get away from the idea that every park should be aspiring to be like a Victorian park. And perhaps we should also stop assuming that every park should be run by local authorities alone, and kept going entirely by taxation. Firstly, we simply cannot afford for every local park to be run that way. But, more importantly, the traditional model of a park won't necessarily meet the needs of today's communities.

The government's ambitious Communities Plan will mean the transformation of huge areas of the country – places in the south where new communities will be created, and places in the north where population decline is bringing dramatic



changes. In both cases, there is a need to think about what sorts of green spaces people will need for the future. So, in these places and others, we have an opportunity to think imaginatively about what 21st century communities need from their green spaces.

And if we get this recipe right we will start to unlock the huge potential for green spaces to become a powerful force for regeneration - and we could start to unlock new sources of funding. So, other than traditionally designed and run parks, what other sorts of green spaces might we need to meet the needs of today's neighbourhoods?

Well, for a start, there is an increasing realisation that the spaces around housing have huge potential. At the moment, a lot of the country's housing is surrounded by featureless patches of grass. It costs quite a bit to maintain, but offers nothing in return for local people. This sort of green



space is a wasted resource, but one that could have huge potential - for instance, as a community garden, where people could grow their own food or flowers, learn new skills, meet their neighbours.

The private sector, too, has a role to play. In some cases it might be in the form of providing and maintaining green spaces. Harmondworth Moor, in west London, for instance, used to be a rubbish dump but is now a winner of the Green Flag Award, the national standard for parks and green spaces.

Yet it is not owned or maintained by the local council, but owned by British Airways and managed by a private contractor, Glendale.

We need to think far more creatively about how parks and other green spaces can meet the needs of people today - because the way we live our lives has, in many ways, changed over the last few decades. As we know from our increasingly crowded town centres, people are far more willing to stay out late at night than they were even a few years ago. Yet they are unlikely to go to



the park, because its gates were probably shut at six.

In many places in the country young people say that they would like skateparks. Yet often, adults refuse to let skateparks be built – despite the fact that we keep saying we want young people to do more exercise. It's no wonder that teenagers hang around in bus shelters and on street corners – there is often nowhere else for them to meet.

And we need to ensure that parks staff are available on site at suitable times. Most parks, for instance, have very few staff – if you are lucky, you might find a couple of gardeners in the park from 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. No-one running an indoor leisure centre would contemplate having staff in a building from Monday to Friday if all the visitors were there on Saturday and Sunday – yet when it comes to parks this is quite normal.

There are many indications that high quality green spaces can help with both economic regeneration – and one indication of this is the 10-15 per cent increase in property prices around parks and squares – but also in community regeneration, by involving local communities in practical projects that help them develop skills, confidence and social cohesion.

The government has recognised that by letting our urban parks decline we have lost – or nearly lost – some of the places that are most valuable to our local communities. Its response has been to set up CAFE Space to help stop this decline, by giving local authorities strategic help, by commissioning research, and by sharing good practice.

We are doing all of this, but we cannot succeed alone – our parks are valuable to all of us, and we all need to support them. High quality parks and public spaces benefit us all. If you agree that we need to bring new life to our parks, streets and squares and want to make your voice heard, sign up to the Manifesto for Better Public Spaces. Every person or organisation who signs up to support the manifesto at www.itsyourspace.org.uk will help to make the case for investing more in parks and public spaces, for everyone to enjoy.

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