

## Urban Parks as Community Places

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*The era of pavement and concrete is an era of the past. We want to grow smart. We want to grow green and we want to enhance the quality of life for our citizens. - Antonio Villaraigosa, Los Angeles, California Mayor, March 7, 2006*



Celebration in Central Market, Stavanger, Norway

The Chuncheon G5 Project provides a wonderful opportunity to enliven and enlarge the public realm of the city. More importantly it will provide increased access to a diverse range of open spaces for residents and visitors. In my remarks today, I would like to suggest some of the aspects of open space and public life to consider in the future development of these projects. I want to play particular attention to how these places can be designed and managed as green community places and encourage public engagement. How can designed landscapes such as urban parks and gardens become well-used and loved places? How can concepts such as ecological and sustainable design include public use and enjoyment of open space? What are appropriate design models that invite community engagement and activity?

## Urban Parks as Community Engagement

An important way cities can use parks and open spaces is for community engagement. This is the process of working collaboratively with individuals and groups to improve their local environment. For parks and open spaces, community engagement allows public officials to directly involve their constituencies in the ongoing design, planning, and management of these resources. This process results in informed and engaged residents that feel better connected to their communities.



Davis Farmer's Market on Winter Day

While sometimes contentious but more often productive and rewarding, community engagement is an essential ingredient of making successful urban open space. Parks support community engagement by providing residents with a venue for participation in and attachment to their communities. They also provide a sense of place and offer essential life-enhancing qualities that aid community and individual well-being. By understanding the community benefits of parks, decision makers can develop constituencies that can support and sustain their urban park systems over time.



Children's Fountain,  
Davis Central Park

***Parks are one of the most effective ways to build a sense of community and improve quality of life.***

Parks are one of the most effective methods to change the character and improve the image of a community. Park improvements are often quick and tangible actions for mayors and citizens and can work in concert with other city-wide programs such as traffic management, creating cultural activities and sustainable development. Benefits of urban parks are numerous and include restorative experience, physical health benefits and improving regional air quality.

***Parks provide places for people to connect and interact in a shared environment.***

Parks create a sense of place by connecting residents to one another and to their larger environment. City parks also provide residents with meaningful ways to express their concerns about the environment. They can physically reconnect communities to themselves by creating linkages or restoring historic connections broken by highways, sprawl, and poor planning decisions. Greenways, green streets, and linear parks are now widely used open space types.

For example, a study by Human-Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois found that the more green space in cities, the more that residents use public space and know each other. The researchers also found that relationships between neighbors are made stronger by the mere presence of vegetation. Compared to residents living near barren spaces, those closer to green spaces enjoy more social activities, have more visitors, know more of their neighbors, and have stronger feelings of belonging. They found that greener common areas facilitate the development and maintenance of stronger social ties.

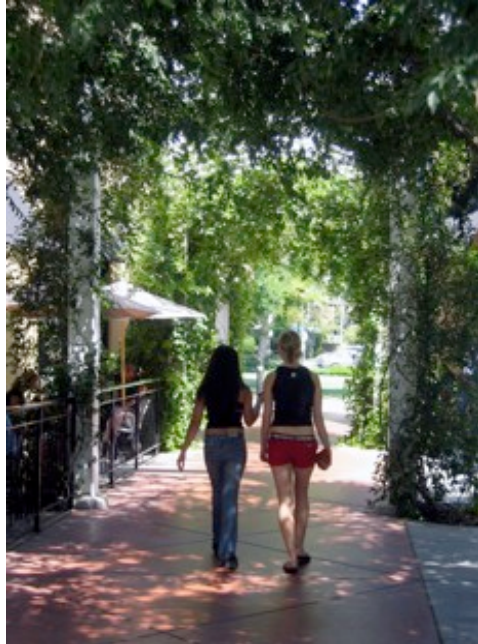
***Parks can be mixed life places.*** It is important to think of parks and green spaces as places that bring together different kinds of people including children, teenagers, the elderly, tourists, and recent residents. It is this diverse mix of people that makes urban parks successful.



*"Picnic in the Park", Central Park in Davis, California, USA*



*Parks can be gardens.* Parks need not be just grass and trees but can include new and innovative elements such as public gardens, community gardens, skateboard parks as well as natural areas. Diverse kinds of vegetation can be used to create more diverse urban parks.



Central Walkway, Davis Commons

*Ecological parks can also be people places.* Parks should be designed to provide ecological benefits. Sustainable parks do not need to exclude people but should engage them in experiencing the natural world. This can be accomplished through direct access to natural areas and using art as a way to reveal natural processes.



Naturalistic Play, Village Homes, Davis, California, USA

***Parks can help restore childhood.*** It is critical to think of the needs of children and teenagers in designing urban parks and open spaces. Parks can provide opportunities for children to become directly involved in the built and natural environment and help them experience childhood, a process often missing in modern urban life.



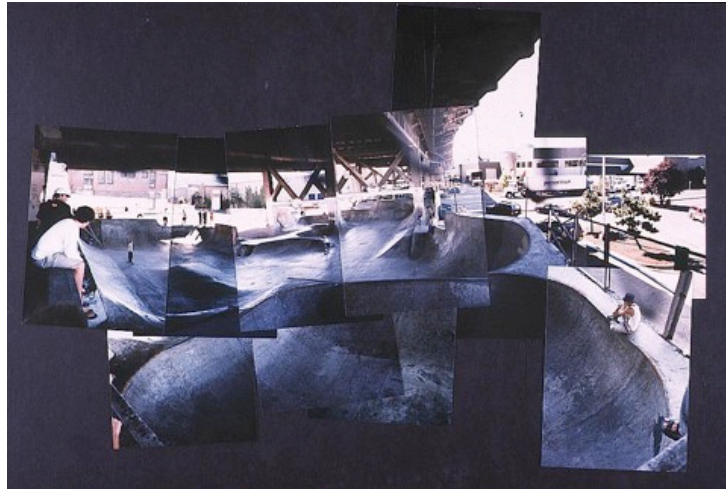
Parc Guell, Barcelona Spain

***Culture is critical to integrate into park design.*** Culture is often neglected in urban park planning and design. Designers and planners need to consider the different cultural groups that use urban parks and work to express their needs through programming and design.



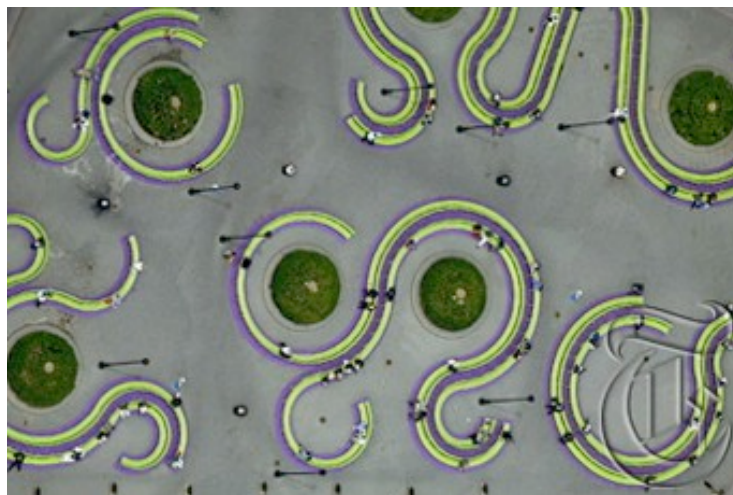
Christo's Umbrellas for New York City's Central Park

*Management and ongoing participation is critical for success.* Parks can channel positive community participation by getting diverse people to work together toward a shared vision. The benefits of participation in the ongoing development of urban parks and open spaces include leading to a stronger sense of community and an increased sense of user or community control. There are also many low cost and effective methods of community participation available including workshops, surveys, interviews, and observation.



Skatepark, Portland, Oregon, USA

### The Role of Design - Some Recent Examples



Plaza, New York City (Martha Schwartz)

Design and planning play critical roles in making successful urban open spaces. I will show some examples from my own design work as well from recent large park projects and competitions I have been involved in to illustrate these principles. They include:



***Central Park and Davis Farmers Market, Davis, California, USA.*** This urban park in this university city of 75,000 combines a lively Farmers Market and a town square where the community can gather in one place. The park also includes a Public Garden, teen center and a central green.



Overview of Davis Central Park and Farmer's Market

***The Davis Greenway, Davis, California, USA.*** This greenway provides fifty miles of bike paths, parks and natural areas into one continuous system of parks and open spaces connecting all parts of the city with green infrastructure. Residents can bike or jog around the edge of the city on the greenway without crossing a road.



Davis Greenway

***Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.*** This 100-acre new park along the White River in a large city in the middle of the United States uses art to reconnect people with nature. Artists are involved in several parts of the park include The Meadow, The Wetlands, The Lake and The Wilds to develop major art works.



Art and Nature Park Master Plan

***Giardini di Porta Nuova, Milan, Italy.*** Developed as part of an invited competition in 2003, this proposed large urban park connects several areas of the city including its government center, several neighborhoods, a central train station and the new Fashion City. Included in the proposal are a major botanical garden and central green that can accommodate gatherings of 50,000 people.



Proposal for Giardini di Porta Nuova, Milan, Italy



***Gold Rush Park, Sacramento, California, USA.*** This proposed 1000-acre park proposed near the center of California's state capitol along the Sacramento River, brings together a diverse number of cultural facilities into one place. Included are a zoo, botanical garden, new wetlands, and other public uses.



Proposal for Gold Rush Park by UC Davis students

***Orange County Great Park, Irvine, California, USA.*** Larger than Central Park in New York City and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, this new urban park near Los Angeles will transform a large military base and airport into a major new regional open space. The design selected from an invited competition of seven international firms will construct a new canyon through the site with cultural elements such as theatres, gardens and natural areas.



Selected Plan for Orange County Great Park (Ken Smith)

All projects by Mark Francis unless otherwise indicated

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