

## Urban Open Space

### Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City

#### THE IDEA OF AN

#### “URBAN OPEN SPACE” SYSTEM.

Character towns have extensive areas and lands devoted to parks and open spaces; sometimes these are organized into systems. When systematically organized, the collection of parks and open lands becomes a holistic, integrated system with all public use land and water in the city devoted to parks, plazas, urban school grounds, stormwater ponds, protected wetlands, lakes, streams and landscaped spaces visually supplemented by private lawns and gardens.

If you want to go crazy, think of the entire city as a “park” with passive and active spaces linked together with trails and streams. Boston’s Emerald Necklace and many other “systems” of parks and open spaces throughout America use their open space system to define their towns as character places. Publicly accessible and connected open space is a community asset too precious to be ignored or squandered or segregated.

#### COMPONENTS OF THE URBAN OPEN SPACE SYSTEM.

##### 1. Public Parks and Gardens.

Park lands are the most obvious part of the urban open space system and often serve as the focal point of the system. Public parks provide managed spaces, facilities, gathering places for casual or programmed use, trail heads for bike/ped systems and environmental information centers for the school system. The park system is the major component of the urban open space system and amplifies its benefits when connected.



*Active Parks with Music and Food.*



*An Urban Open Space.*



*A Quieter Place.*

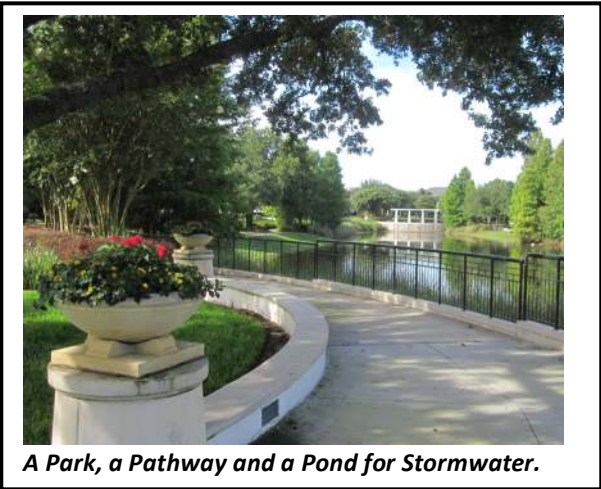
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### 2. Stormwater Ponds.

In Florida, the rule of thumb is that 15 – 20% of any development site will be used for stormwater ponds. These can be ugly, isolated and fenced areas, or they can be beautiful aesthetic features that create community and real estate value.

The multiple benefits offered by the creative design of stormwater areas builds lasting value. Landscaping is an appreciating asset; pleasant water features build real estate values and provide communities with many benefits.



**A Park, a Pathway and a Pond for Stormwater.**

### 3. Lawns and Grounds hosting Buildings.

Many urban buildings have lawns, plazas and other substantial open spaces that benefit the public. The initial design and the connection of these building-based open spaces can be important elements of the city’s urban open space system. City halls, libraries, museums, hotels and office buildings provide some of the most useful and beautiful open spaces in many towns.



**Public Urban Gardens.**

Shared facilities provide real benefits, such as the use of public school grounds as a public community park, or the excess land at a water plant for a Little League field. Joint Use Agreements that cover insurance, hours of use, maintenance obligations and security can quickly multiple the inventory of local parks.

The connection of public plazas and community spaces with trails and walkways greatly enhances the entire system.



**Urban Open Space in Front of a Downtown Hotel.**

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#### 4. Urban Trails.

Where were all the bikers and walkers before there were urban trails? Trails are packed providing safe passage for recreational and commuter users.

A connected system of parks also makes it easier to have specialty parks for baseball, swimming, lacrosse or other activities that require special fields or buildings. The trails extend the reach of their service areas.

Trails can use utility easements, drainageways and street corridors with sufficient space for safe pedestrian and bike travel. Using established corridor lands enables the trail system to be extensive without having to buy new property. "Rails-to-trails" is a model that can be applied to many other types of linear corridors.



**Urban Trails Connect Parks and Civic Spaces.**

#### 5. Wetlands, Conservation Lands, Water Bodies.

Natural areas are the prototypical open spaces, many of which are located in the city. The appropriate use and preservation of these natural lands adds significantly to the overall urban open space system. They serve as visual amenities and sites for public gardens and passive parks. A comprehensive system of open spaces with the celebration of the city's lakes and riverfronts creates and reflects the character of a town. The integration of the urban open space system into the heart of the city shows people what's important to the city's leaders.



**An Urban Soccer "Pitch".**

#### 6. Really Complete Streets.

"Complete streets" accommodate all modes of travel, but really complete streets regard streets as part of the community open space system. They can be functional trails that are beautiful and walkable connecting activities, like parks, shopping and schools.

#### 7. Hardscape Settings.

Urban open space also takes the form of hard-surface recreation places used by the public. The pictured urban soccer pitch is an example of the creative use of a parking lot.

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#### THE LITERATURE.

The professional literature from Australia is some of the best at exploring the use of physical improvements as social infrastructure.

The “lessons” presented below reaffirm: urban green/open spaces should be versatile, generous and accessible open spaces, parks and plazas that interact with adjacent restaurants, shops and civic activities, all connected with paths and streets.

The study cited below provides typologies, best practices and standards based on the practices in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Paris, Malmö,

Chicago, Los Angeles and Hangzhou, China along with an extensive reference list.

The literature is also rich with work that inspires, such as *A Clearing in the Distance* by Witold Rybczynski describing Olmstead’s life and works. Lawrence Halprin’s *Cities* illuminates a contemporary example of what’s possible from a fertile mind and active practice. *The Plan of Chicago* by Carl Smith recounts the pre-meditated leveraging of the extensive and connected open space to create and enhance the White City.

#### Important Lessons Offered by the Literature on Urban Green/Open Space and Density When Planning for the Future Needs of Inner City Brisbane

1. **Provide versatile spaces** that can be adapted for future needs – do not let design strangle a space;
2. **Be generous** in the provision of green space as it bolsters mental health and physical activity levels while also providing a range of ‘free’ ecosystem services (e.g. cooling heat islands, sequestering carbon, reducing pollution, intercepting stormwater). Land values are also significantly higher around urban greenspaces – thus improving municipal revenue;
3. Ensure that green/open spaces **offer a range of informal services** and programmed activities e.g. dance lessons or programmed sports events as well as weekend markets, food vending, or informal recreation such as tai chi groups;
4. **Allow for smaller intimate spaces** such as plazas and courtyards where people can gather to watch other people, read a book, eat lunch or just watch the world go by;
5. Require developers to **locate commercial activities** (e.g. shops with bright and interesting window displays, bookstores or cafes) **next to green/open spaces** as they can add vitality, excitement and safety to such spaces;
6. Make sure that urban green/open spaces: are **easily accessible**; provide intimate corners as well as large expanses; have a broad range of amenities (e.g. seating, fountains, toilets and the like); offer access to winter sunshine, shade from summer heat and shelter from the high winds; are flexible spaces that can be used for a wide variety of activities; are complemented by sympathetic commercial uses (e.g. cafes);
7. Design new types of spaces like **green roofs, green walls**, skateboard parks and community gardens;
8. **Interconnect green/open spaces** via pedestrian pathways and/or multiple use trails (e.g. cycling, walking, roller-blading etc.).

Source: *Green and Open Space Planning for Urban Consolidation – A Review of the Literature and Best Practice*; Jason Byrne and Neil Sipe, Urban Research Program, Griffith College, Issues Paper 11, March 2010.

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#### CONCLUSIONS.

1. **Consider the city as a park.** Plan the city's urban open space as a single system. Consider the city as a holistic park with activities to host, features to display, paths to stroll and beauty to behold.
2. **Have an expansive definition of urban open space.** Include the full range of places and spaces that serve physical and visual purposes in the system; then connect them physically, visually and informationally.
3. **Use the city's urban open space system to unify and organize the community.**
4. **Leverage the open space system to create community and real estate value.** Leverage the system; use it to drive land use decisions, to guide the locations of civic buildings; to house the city's social infrastructure; to promote sociability; to demand open space amenities from all building projects; and to foster economic growth.

#### READINGS.

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