

A HOLISTIC OPEN SPACE SYSTEM, connect everything.

The City as a Park.

If you want a big idea, think of the entire city as a “park” with passive and active spaces linked together with trails and streams. Cities have active areas, open spaces, places for food and beverage, recreation areas, paths and trails. If you take a city future land use map and generalize your view, you can picture the elements of the city as the elements of a sophisticated park. Such a view gives one an entirely different perspective on how to plan and design the city. Pedestrians, open spaces and connections become more important, all within a quality aesthetic.

On a lesser but still grand scale, consider the system of parks within the city. Boston’s Emerald Necklace and many other “systems” of parks and open spaces throughout America use their open space system to define their cities and towns and establish their character. Publicly accessible and connected open space is a community asset too precious to be ignored, squandered or segregated. Park systems planning is as important as individual parks planning and design.

Character towns are often identified by their parks, gardens, trees and landscaped civic buildings linked by well-used walking paths and bike trails. When systematically organized, the collection of parks and open lands becomes a holistic, integrated network of all public land and water in the city devoted to parks, plazas, school grounds, stormwater ponds, wetlands, lakes, streams and landscaped spaces including private lawns and gardens. The inclusion of private open spaces and building grounds enhances the outcome.

Components of the City Urban Open Space System.

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 natural environment information centers for school systems. The park system is the major component of the urban open space network; connections amplify the benefits.

Stormwater ponds, by rule of thumb in Florida, consume 15 to 20% of any development site. These can be isolated, ugly and fenced areas, or they can be aesthetic features that create community and real estate value. The multiple benefits offered by creatively designing stormwater areas builds lasting value.



A park, a pathway and a pond for stormwater.

Landscaping is an appreciating asset; pleasant water features build real estate values and provide many community benefits. Landscaped areas, public and private, set the city's aesthetic standard.

Lawns and grounds private and public buildings. Many urban buildings have lawns, plazas and other substantial open spaces that benefit the public, physically or visually. The design and connection of these building-based open spaces can be important elements of the city's urban open space system. This is especially true when connected to other open spaces and civic places. City halls, libraries, museums, hotels and private office buildings provide some of the most useful and beautiful open spaces in many towns.

Shared buildings and grounds. Shared facilities provide real benefits, such as the use of public school grounds as a 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 multiply the inventory of local parks by incorporating the adjacent space into the park. The connection of public plazas and community spaces with trails and walkways greatly enhances the entire system.

Public Gardens are community assets not fully appreciated. Whether naturalistic or manicured, they provide respite for busy families, aesthetic breaks in an urban landscape as a place of beauty that can inspire residents and businesses to consider beauty more intensely than they might otherwise.

Urban trails. Where were all the cyclists and walkers before there were urban trails? Trails are packed providing safe paths 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 when provided with sufficient space for safe pedestrian and bike travel. Using lands in established corridors enables the trail system to be built without having to buy new property. "Rails-to-trails" is a model that can be applied to many other types of linear corridors.



Public urban gardens...The Leu House.



Public urban gardens and bikes.

Wetlands, conservation lands, and water bodies.

Natural areas are the prototypical open spaces, many of which may be located in the city. The appropriate use and preservation of these natural lands add 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 the town. Signs and educational kiosks

add to the community's understanding of the resource. The penetration of the natural open space system into the heart of the city demonstrates what's important to the community.



Urban neighborhood wetland, with education.

Really complete streets. "Complete streets" accommodate all modes of travel, but *really* complete streets also regard streets as part of the community open space system. They can be functional trails that are beautiful and walkable connections between neighborhoods, parks, shopping and schools. Complete streets also work in activity centers.



"Complete streets" accommodate walkers, cyclists and drivers.

Hardscape settings. Urban open space also takes the form of hard-surface recreation places used by the public.

The urban soccer pitch developed between buildings is an example of the creative re-use of a downtown parking lot. The idea of using vacant sites for permanent or temporary parks is applicable to large and small cities.

Synergy, an often mis-applied term, fits perfectly here. The combination of individual parks, open spaces, building grounds and trails is a much bigger community asset than any one of the individual parts. **Think systems.**



An urban soccer "pitch".

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 that 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.

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 including cooling heat islands, sequestering carbon, reducing pollution and 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 such as 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.

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 that enhanced the “White City”. *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch reinforces the idea that the city’s attitude and application of aesthetic and open space concepts defines the city for its residents, businesses and visitors. David Barth’s *Parks and Recreation System Planning, A New Approach for Creating Sustainable, Resilient Communities* is a wonderful and useful guide.

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. Consider the park as a classroom.

History, nature and socialization are well suited for outdoor classrooms.

3. Prominently locate and respectfully design civic buildings. They reflect the town's character.

4. Have a holistic view of the city's open space. Have an expansive and inclusive definition of urban open space with the full range of places and spaces that serve physical and visual purposes in the system; then connect them physically, visually and informationally.

5. Leverage the open space system:

- a. to create community and real estate value,
- b. to drive land use decisions and guide the locations of civic buildings,
- c. to house social infrastructure and promote civic sociability,
- d. to demand open space amenities from all building projects,
- e. to showcase the town's historic and natural resources,
- f. to foster economic growth.

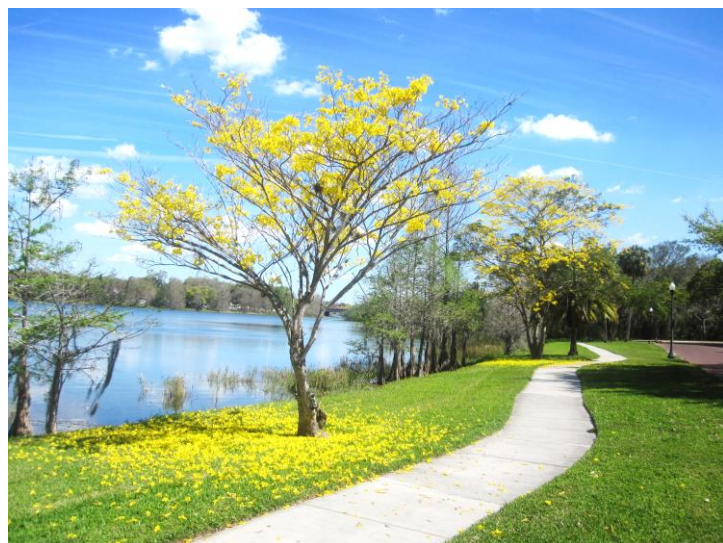
Use the city's urban open space system to define, unify and organize the city.



Lunch and business and pleasure, all on one porch.



A concert in the park teaches values and culture.



Waste nothing, every space and place in the city can be beautiful.