

Parks, Plazas, Trails and Open Spaces: Citywide Amenities and Connectors.

The Idea of “Urban Open Space” Systems.

Character towns have extensive areas and lands devoted to parks and open spaces. When systematically organized, the collection of parks, plazas, school grounds, stormwater ponds, protected wetlands, lakes, streams, private lawns and gardens becomes a holistic, integrated system of lands and waters devoted to the city’s health, recreation and welfare.

View the Entire City as a Park.

If you want to think big, 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.

Downtown as a Park.

Parks have open spaces, active spaces, natural areas, pathways, stormwater areas, shelters, shops, restaurants and maintenance yards. Downtowns have all the same uses and activities as sophisticated parks with a different scale and proportion. Think of downtown, all of downtown, as a park.

Parks, like downtowns, are designed to be beautiful; to be places for repose, for mingling, for fun, for activity, for enjoying the out-of-doors. In a very direct way, downtowns are, in fact, parks. Why not design them as such?

Designing the downtown with the same care and attention given to a highly visible, highly active public park requires the same balance of aesthetics and function.



A neighborhood retention pond; and an amenity.

City Streets as Urban Open Spaces.

The plazas would be sized and located for congeniality, the shops and restaurants would be located and designed for leisurely engagement. Trees and flowers would abound. The private buildings, the community theater, the public library, the city gardens, the schools, the galleries and the museums would be the gems of the downtown park’s main promenade.

All these park-like places and activities exist in the town. Why not place them, design them and use them as connected park-like features that define the town. The entire system of “mass and void” would be connected with paths, quiet streets, transitways and, when available, water courses. The pathways and public venues would be the organizing elements. Information, security and wayfinding systems would serve residents, visitors, workers and customers.

Let Open Space Define the Town.

The prominence of the urban open space system shows what's important to the city.

The open spaces, the green areas and plazas can define and organize the town. The open spaces make the built spaces work, just like the logs of a fire.

"Fire" by Judy Brown emotes the essential need for open space in fires, and in cities.

FIRE ~ Judy Brown

What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.
Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.

So building fires
requires attention
to the spaces in between,
as much as to the wood.

When we are able to build
open spaces
in the same way
we have learned
to pile on the logs,
then we can come to see how
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel
together, that make fire possible.

We only need to lay a log
lightly from time to time.

A fire grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to burn
can find its way.

Judy Brown from *The Sea Accepts All Rivers*

Judy Brown is also the author of *A Leaders Guide to Reflective Practice*, Trafford Publishing.

Leverage all Town Venues to Make the Town Feel Like a Park.

Design and site every building to reinforce the park-like setting of main street. Place them, design them and use them as connected features that let the green spaces define the downtown.



A quieter place.



All the benches are full.



City parks as classrooms.

Let Every Type of Open Space Contribute to the Holistic System.

1. Public Parks, Cemeteries 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 also incorporates many environmentally sensitive lands. Parks are the major component of the urban open space system and amplify their benefits when connected.



Active parks with music and food.

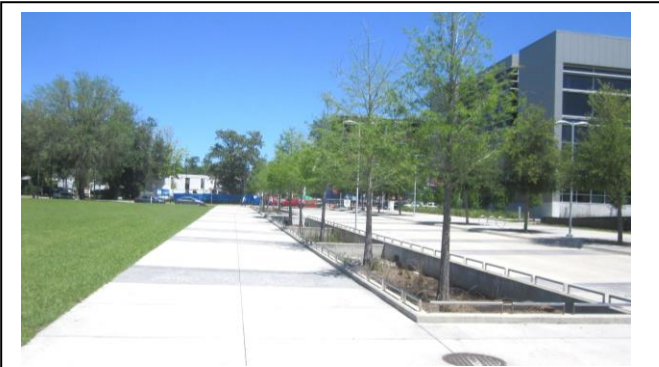


Public urban gardens.

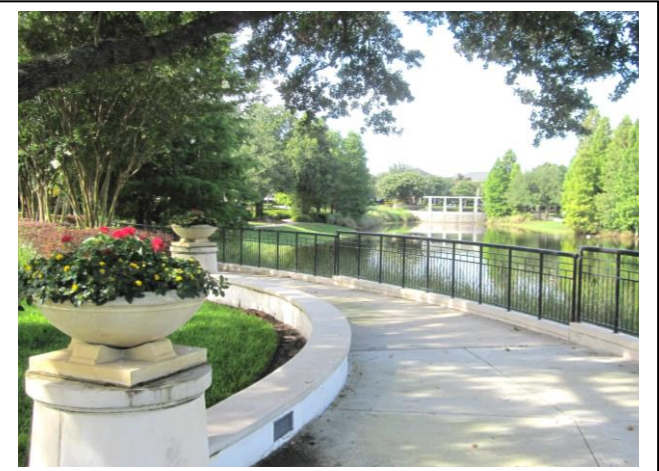
2. Stormwater Ponds.

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 features that create community and real estate value.

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



Low-impact design works in tight urban spaces.



A park, a pathway and a pond for stormwater.

3. Lawns and Grounds of Public and Private 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.

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 with other owners of parks and open spaces, like the school board, that cover insurance, hours of use, maintenance obligations and security can quickly multiply the inventory of local parks.



The connection of public plazas and community spaces with trails and walkways greatly enhances the entire system. A unified open space system can be constructed by connecting the individual parts.

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. Trails and paths extend the reach of the service areas for specialty parks for baseball, swimming, lacrosse or other activities that require special fields or buildings.

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.



A downtown "third place".

5. Wetlands, Conservation Lands, Water Bodies.

Natural areas are 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 synergistic system of open spaces creates and reflects the character of the town with the celebration of the city's unique natural features, lakes and riverfronts.

Olmsted's Philosophy

“Olmsted's main goal, no matter what he was doing was to attempt to improve American society. He had visions of vast recreational and cultural achievements in the hearts of cities. He did not see parks as just vast meadows, but rather he saw them as places of harmony; places where people would go to escape life and regain their sanity. He wanted these parks to be available to all people no matter what walk of life the person followed.”

<http://www.fredericklawolmsted.com>

6. 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.



Use every niche!; Once a parking lot, now an urban soccer “Pitch”.

7. Really “Complete Streets”.

Really “complete streets” provide for all modes of travel and of life. They are streets, trails, parks and spaces that beautifully and walkably connect homes, parks, shops, offices and schools.



Saturday in the park.



The fun of neighborhood festivals.

Lessons from “Down Under”.

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 Olmsted’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.

Leveraging parks and open spaces for social, economic development, environmental protection and city beautification is a proven method for enhancing community pride and hometown spirit.

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.

The last word - The combined power of a unified and coordinated open space system can create the image of the town; and OBTW, it can provide a great connected open space system for residents and visitors. A great system of open spaces, parks, school grounds, water fronts, natural lands and historic resources can drive the character of the community, improve its sociability, help attract jobs and connect main street to the entire city.

National Association for Olmsted Parks

Across the nation, “the Olmsted’s work reflects a vision of American communities and American society still relevant today—a commitment to visually compelling and accessible green space that restores and nurtures the body and spirit of all people, regardless of their economic circumstances. The Olmsteds believed in the restorative value of landscape and that parks can bring social improvement by promoting a greater sense of community and providing recreational opportunities, especially in urban environments.

Use parks to define the city.

<http://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/about-the-olmsted-legacy>



Let’s not forget **cemeteries** and their historic roles as places where people went to picnic and enjoy a nice afternoon outing. Landscape architects used to, and some still do, design cemeteries as peaceful repasts for the living and the dead. Cemeteries are an important component of a city’s open space system.



Enjoy the downtown market.



A public garden is a memorable personal place.



Lunch and business and pleasure, all in a park.



Public urban gardens and bikes.



A concert in the park teaches the value of culture.



Urban stormwater as a park-side pond.

Creating places and spaces for happy memories in an important city function.

Conclusions.

The city's open space system consisting of parks, natural areas, school grounds, civic spaces and all other open lands can be connected and organized to define the city.

1. **Have an expansive and comprehensive 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.
2. **Leverage the open space system to create community and real estate value.** Use the open space system to drive land use decisions, to guide the location of civic buildings; to promote sociability; to house social infrastructure; to demand open space amenities from all building projects; and to foster economic growth.
3. **Organize community activities using the city's open space system.**
4. **Let public art reveal the city's personality.**
5. **Use the main street open space system to organize downtown.** Wayfinding, street names, sidewalks, accessible parking areas and plaza sequences help people feel comfortable.
6. **Connect the city's parks, plazas, school yards, cemeteries and parking areas to the city's open space system** with beautiful streets, ample sidewalks, trails and pathways for the benefit of residents, employees and visitors.
7. **Consider main street as a beautiful meeting place, a "third place",** for commerce, civic and community interests to engage.
8. **Enhance property values with beauty.** Consider the aesthetic features of the city, such as parks and plazas, as value added to neighborhood and downtown real estate.
9. **Use the city's urban open space system to define the city.** Be known as a beautiful and fascinating town.



City parks are great classrooms.



Public art; a testament to community values.