

# Urban Open Space Systems.

*Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City and Save the Environment.*

## 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.



## Urban Open Space Systems.

*Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City and Save the Environment.*

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



*An Urban Place for Urban Wildlife.*

### 4. 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.



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

## Urban Open Space Systems.

*Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City and Save the Environment.*

5. **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. Connecting of public plazas and community spaces with bike/ped trails greatly enhances the entire system.

6. **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.

### 7. 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 system of parks connected by trails 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.

### 8. 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.



*Urban Trails Connect Parks and Civic Spaces.*



*"Complete streets" accommodate walkers, cyclists and drivers.*

## Urban Open Space Systems.

*Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City and Save the Environment.*

A connected system of open spaces that celebrates 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.

### 9. 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.

### 10. 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.

**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.**



*Public urban gardens and bikes.*



*Public urban gardens and historic homes.*



*An Urban Soccer "Pitch".*

# Urban Open Space Systems.

*Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City and Save the Environment.*

## 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 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.

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.

### 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** adaptable 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.

# Urban Open Space Systems.

*Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City and Save the Environment.*

## CONCLUSIONS.

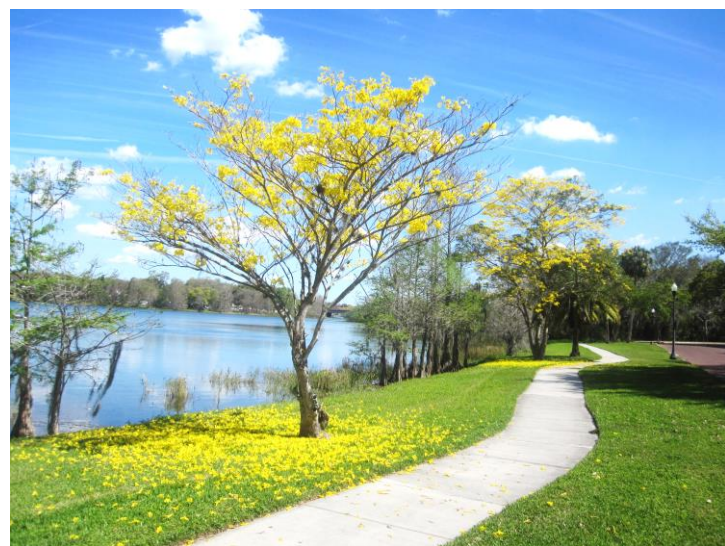
1. **Consider the city as a park.**  
Plan the city's urban open space as a single system. Consider the city as a holistic park with activities to host, features to display, paths to stroll and beauty to behold.
2. **Prominently locate and respectfully design civic buildings** to reflect the town's character.
3. **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 visually and functionally connect the physical, economic and social purposes in the city.
4. **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.



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.

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

## Urban Open Space Systems.

*Leverage the Open Space System to Unify the City and Save the Environment.*

5. **Consider the town's street system as part of the open space/greenspace system and design it accordingly.**
6. **Connect everything.** Use signs, pathways, brochures, websites, tours, drainageways and public buildings to create a holistic open space system that serves transportation, social gathering, environmental preservation, recreation and education purposes.
7. **Align the Parks and Recreation Department with the Environmental Protections Department** in order to use park lands for ecological preservation purposes and to use, appropriately, ecologically important lands for recreation and education purposes.
8. **Consider the park as a classroom.** History, nature and socialization are well suited for outdoor classrooms.



Urban neighborhood wetland, with education.

### READINGS.

1. ***A Clearing in the Distance, Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century***, Witold Rybczynski, Scribner, 1999.
2. ***Biophilic Cities: Integrating Nature into Urban Design and Planning***, Timothy Beatley, Island Press, Center for Resource Economics, Washington DC, 2011.
3. ***Cities***, Lawrence Halprin, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, [1963], Revised Edition, 4<sup>th</sup> printing 1978.
4. ***Design of Cities: Revised Edition***, [Edmund N. Bacon](#), The Penguin Group, NY, 1976.
5. ***How Paris Became Paris, The Invention of the Modern City***, Joan DeJean, Bloomsbury, New York, 2014.
6. ***Parks and Recreation System Planning, A New Approach for Creating Sustainable, Resilient Communities***, David L. Barth, PhD, Island Press, Washington D.C., 2020.
7. ***St. Louis, The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape***, Eric Sandweiss, Temple University Press, 2001.
8. ***The Plan of Chicago, David Burnham and the Remaking of the American City***, Carl Smith, University of Chicago Press, 2006.
9. ***The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces***, William H. Whyte (Author, 1917 - 1999), Project for Public Spaces, New York, 1980.
10. ***Towns and Town-Making Principles***, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, published by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York, 1991.
11. ***The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design***, John Punter, UBC Press, 2003.