

Fields of Play: Sport and Public Spaces



Aerial Swing, San Jacinto Park, HOUSTON, Texas.

Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

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The 19th-century tradition of picturesque, landscaped public spaces lingers in many American cities. The broad, tree-lined boulevard or parkway, the landscaped cemetery, and the landscaped residential neighborhood are still elements in the older urban environment, and the city park in the style of Olmsted and Cleveland, though often mutilated and abused, is still a source of civic pride.

The original purpose of these and similar public spaces was clear: they were to add to the monumental dignity of the city by providing areas of designed natural beauty. The park was not for games and play. It was where people came together, as in a family garden, to share the experience of nature and confirm their sense of community. Those sports favored by the middle class – tennis, badminton, croquet, archery, and their derivatives, golf and polo – were confined to the private lawn or the country club. The landscaped park had a more formal, more contemplative quality. The park, however, was soon discovered by all ranks in society. A movement known as the Sanitary Awakening prompted the inhabitants of the crowded sections of town to seek the fresh air, the sunlight, and the quiet of the park, and another reform movement in the 1880s introduced the organized children's playground.

Conservative elements strongly resisted any change in the idyllic quality of the landscaped park, particularly the creation of athletic facilities, but the pressures of a growing population eventually transformed it into a place for patriotic and ethnic celebrations, for concerts and nature studies, and even for boating and swimming. What had originally been a communal work of art, an environment designed to encourage contact with nature, threatened to become a socio-therapeutic resource, a recreation area.

The park was temporarily rescued, thanks to an unforeseen development: the

emergence in the industrial towns of a new concept of sport and recreation. A large number of young wage earners, recently arrived from the country or from overseas, strangers to city life and to one another, found themselves without any means of healthy and inexpensive diversion. They lived in a part of the city without gardens and fields – or parks; all they could turn to was the street and the vacant lot. Their plight was first recognized by certain churches and charitable organizations, notably the YMCA, and though their initial purpose was evangelical, they soon discovered that the best way of attracting young workers was to offer them some form of recreation.

But that recreation had to be adjusted to the limitations of the persons involved. The average industrial worker had little leisure time, little money, and no claim on any space. He had had no experience of lawn sports with their ethical restraints and their soft-peddling of competition. On the other hand, he was eager for companionship, eager to excel and get ahead in the world, and he had been inculcated with disciplined work habits. The YMCA and the churches accordingly devised a number of sports – basketball, volleyball, Ping-Pong, swimming (baseball was already popular) – which emphasized team play, strict rules, the keeping of scores and time, and only the normal amount of dexterity. These sports resembled as little as possible the tradition-laden sports of the middle and upper classes. And they differed in their use of space: the typical lawn sport, along with hunting and fishing, presupposed a familiarity with the immediate natural environment and a trained adjustment to its unpredictability. Chance was a large element in these sports, which one might describe as territorial: closely related to a well-known environment and to its inhabitants insofar as they were fellow players. But blue-collar sports rejected unpredictability. Competition between teams or individuals could only be fair

when both sides were equal, and equality was best established by hard and fast rules, similar equipment and environment, the dimensions of which were guaranteed by established rules. As a result, the new sports created their own artificial, standardized environments: the regulation court, the regulation pool, the regulation field. The unstructured landscape, especially that of the park, was to be avoided.

The spread of these and other related invented sports and games across the country in a matter of a few decades is a chapter in our history familiar to us all. But it never ceases to invite speculation: how a scattering of well-intentioned charitable enterprises, without money or prestige, could eventually produce an attitude toward sport and recreation that gained the widest popularity. Those original games – basketball, volleyball, baseball – were soon augmented by football, hockey, and, lately, even tennis, and their emphasis on competition and technical prowess was taken over in forms of recreation based on mobility: stock-car racing, motorcycle racing, track, and surfing, and to a degree, hang gliding. As sports for young people, many of them have become part of school and college programs with professional ramifications, and even the less structured sports of mobility have their nationally recognized rules and their regional and national meetings and competitions. It is tempting to interpret their rise, at least in part, to the shift in the source of values and support from the house and the neighborhood to the school and place of work – and ultimately to the world of public recognition. The spectacle of countless young players (and drivers and riders) dedicating much of their leisure time to training and maintenance, to the development of physical and mechanical expertise, and their widespread fascination with scores, ratings, and records are in themselves traits which separate them from domestic or

community forms of recreation and suggest the necessity for giving each of them a space of its own.

That, in fact, is what our cities are doing: recognizing that there are at least two distinct forms of recreation: one based on local or territorial sociability and ruled by custom and neighborhood standards, the other based on what might be called sodality: a brotherhood of persons from widely separated origins united by their devotion to a particular sport or philosophy. Melvin Webber's proposal for "community without propinquity" (generally decried as elitist) is in fact an everyday reality in the world of blue-collar recreation. As in all sodalities, what keeps these fraternities of buffs together is reliance on insignia or uniforms, on a special vocabulary, a special press, and an occasional mass meeting. They make no claim on a permanent territory of their own, merely the occasional use of a public space – preferably one which is isolated, open, and empty: an engineered landscape which conveys no message, no surprises, no emotion, but which serves its purpose well.

Those spaces which we now call sport complexes when they are planned and built in cities (of which the Astrodome is a familiar example), but which all too often are inserted in our parks, and residential and wilderness areas, must in the future be kept separate from the small surviving communities. The resurgence of cruising over the last few years has made it clear that certain harmless and very popular forms of mobile recreation can damage a whole neighborhood. Now that our cities are beginning to see the distinction between the two forms, we are planning streets, roads, and public spaces solely for cruising, and even parks for adolescent motorsports. It is not a matter of exiling or isolating sports of mobility and sodality. It is a matter of providing them with appropriate spaces and, at the same time, reserving and rehabilitating spaces within the small community and spaces for pedestrian pleasure.

This brings us back to the park. Michael Laurie, of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley, has what seems to me the best prescription for its future development: he believes "that the parks of our cities need and deserve a fresh look in light of changed and changing circumstances, and that the preservation of 19th- and early 20th-century parks may not be related appropriately to this broader picture.... Doors and options should be left open so that the American city of the future can include open spaces which contribute to some defined purpose, whatever it may be: air quality, festivals, social interaction, sports, wildlife conservation, food production, whatever. In other words, the emphasis [in park rehabilitation] should be on the future, not on the past, and concerned with new directions in urban life." ■