



ELSEVIER

Landscape and Urban Planning 60 (2002) 59–72

LANDSCAPE
AND
URBAN PLANNING

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Urban open space in the 21st century

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Abstract

This paper asks what should be demanded from urban open space in the 21st century. It explores the social and spatial implications of new lifestyles, values, attitudes to nature and sustainability, and the models for future city life and the patterns of urban open space that might accommodate these. One vital role that urban parks play is providing space for the expression of diversity, both personal and cultural; this raises issues of democratic provision for and access to public open space. It suggests, *inter alia*, that the role of the urban street as public space may need to be re-thought. The social and cultural values of open space include attitudes towards nature and the desire for contact with it; contemporary understandings of ecology offer new insights into ways to serve both human needs and the broader ecological framework of urban open space structures. It has been suggested that the urbanity of public open space is threatened by the increase in ‘virtual’ transactions, obviating the need for real, social interaction, but there is also evidence that use of new communications technology can increase and enhance use of public open space; this may include engagement in the productive aspect of our landscape. A more flexible approach to open space definition and usage is proposed, recognising ‘loose-fit’ landscapes which allow opportunities for the socially marginalised and the ecologically shifting within a dynamic framework of urban structures and networks.

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Keywords: Urban; Open space; Parks; Networks; Nature

1. Introduction

This paper is an exploration of what we should be demanding from urban open space in the 21st century: what are the social and spatial implications of new lifestyles, value systems, attitudes to nature and sustainability, and what models for future city life will accommodate these? In looking for ways forward in recent years, governments and politicians have focused on a number of common themes. Variations on the idea of green networks, protecting or enhancing natural resources and systems while linking the urban area for recreational use, have been popular, from Portland, USA to Vienna ([Stadtplanung Wien, 1996](#)),

and Glasgow, UK ([Glasgow City Council, 1999](#)). The importance of the street as public space, and how to make it more attractive for use by the full spectrum of society, has also been highlighted ([Gehl, 1987](#)). People have debated the desirability of different levels of urban density and the importance of different qualities in local open space provision. In Britain, the Government set up an Urban Task Force under the architect Richard Rogers (Lord Rogers of Riverside), which reported in ‘Towards an Urban Renaissance’ ([Rogers, 1999](#)), and a parliamentary inquiry into Town and Country Parks ([House of Commons, 1999](#)) as a prelude to the recent White Paper ‘Our Towns and Cities: The Future, Delivering an Urban Renaissance’ ([Department of the Environment: Transport and the Regions, 2000](#)). Rogers’ report notes that there is a continuing trend towards urbanisation, both in Britain (in 1991, over 80%

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of the population lived in towns and cities of over 10,000 people) and world-wide (today nearly 50% of the world's population live in urban settlements). In the western world, at least, we have an ageing demographic trend and there are increasing demands for the old, the sick and the disabled to be more fully integrated into society. In Britain, up to 16% of the present population are disabled people, many with mobility problems (Rogers, 1999). Thus, we face challenges in providing better access to existing open spaces, apart from any new open space systems that may be developed. Rogers proposes that we "... create beautiful places (in our towns and cities) that are socially cohesive, avoiding disparity of opportunity and promoting equity and social solidarity" (Rogers, 1999, p.47).

Reports such as Rogers' cover many, now widely accepted, notions of open space networks and their potential social, ecological, health and quality of life benefits. This paper is an attempt to take such notions and look beyond them, towards possible new concepts and challenges to address. While detailed funding and management issues, which are often bound up with the particularity of a country's planning history and traditions, may be a key element of open space provision and usage, this paper focuses on broader, and sometimes unconventional, visions and principles for urban open space in this new century. How different are the patterns of urban open space likely to be from what has gone before? Do historic parks and open space patterns offer the right framework, the right extent and complexity for modern and future needs, or should we be planning for completely new structures of open space provision and usage?

2. The role of public open space in a democratic society

The political and public attitude towards a democratic, multicultural society changed, sometimes dramatically and painfully, as the twentieth century drew to a close. The concept of a democratic society as a "melting pot" where cultural differences become homogenised within an overriding expression of national culture has largely been replaced with a more pluralistic ideal. Rather than expecting conformity, we now strive to accept diversity in needs, attitudes and expression, and therefore in provisions for soci-

ety. What remains true for public open space, and for urban parks in particular, is that they are the places where democracy is worked out, quite literally, *on the ground*, and therefore, the way such spaces are designed, managed and used demonstrates the realities of political rhetoric.

How can we define a politic that can bridge the multiple heterogeneities in society without repressing difference? The nineteenth century park, that quintessential expression of philanthropic but patronising urban planning, was designed as "a kind of democracy, where the poor, the rich, the mechanic, the merchant and the man of letters, mingle on a footing of perfect equality" (Schuyler, 1986 reflecting Olmsted's views, p. 65). The park was seen as a democratic place where democracy meant conformity and a means to create a unified nation. Today, we need a more sophisticated understanding of the democratic process in order to identify, and provide for, the needs and desires of all in the diverse mosaic of our urban cultures. Traditional, vote-based democracy can provide for the majority view but this does not always protect the interests of valid minority views, nor define what determines validity. How can we ensure that what suits one group of people does not preclude provision for, and enjoyment by, another group? It has been suggested (see Ward Thompson, 1996) that, instead of the park as "melting pot", we need the "salad bowl", where different cultures can find individual expression. This, of course, has implications for parks that were originally designed for a single, predominant, culture and raises questions about how adaptable historic (often 19th century) parks are and how much their design, as opposed to their programmed use, needs to change in the 21st century. It also raises issues of accessibility and funding.

The tension between determination to restrict "inappropriate" behaviour in a park and the desires of many users for more varied recreational opportunities has remained a constant from the nineteenth century to today; it is just that the activities deemed controversial—mountain biking or roller blading, for example—have changed. Different social and cultural groups have different perceptions of what is acceptable or safe behaviour and some conflicts can be resolved by time-programming rather than space-programming, but it is clear that only a truly participatory planning process will resolve them. A

likely benefit of developing information technology will be systems which enable ordinary citizens to contribute their desires and visions for the future into a planning database linked to three-dimensional, GIS-based visualisations (Bishop and Gimblett, 2000; Wherrett, 2001). At present access to computer-based media, and the level of confidence with which people engage with such media, still exclude some categories of society but this is likely to change very rapidly. If modelling systems can allow people to record their own important memories and desires and to engage with the emotional and social experience, and not simply the visual implications, of landscape options, then there is a real chance of developing the vision of participatory planning that Geddes promoted nearly a century ago (Macdonald, 1992).

However sophisticated our planning process is in the new electronic age, there are likely to remain certain timeless constants. Any survey of urban park use indicates that the majority of users want to come by foot and will only do so on a regular basis if the park is within 3–5 minutes walk of their home or workplace (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989, Comedia/Demos, 1995; Godbey et al., 1992). The people who perhaps have most need for access to public parks and the opportunity for sociability in a safe, outdoor setting will always be those who are least freely mobile (through age, economic status, lack of private transport, etc.)—children, older people, disabled people, the unemployed—and so there will always be a demand for good access to appropriate, local open spaces. Just what form these spaces take continues to be the challenge.

Corraliza (2000) has carried out research on people's preference for "pathways" and "stay places" (parks, plazas, etc.) and found that the non-spatial qualities of landscape are just as important as any spatial qualities (emotional and personal issues such as motivation, age, etc., account for 32% of the variance) but also that people (at least in Spain) preferred pathways to "stay places". He suggests that there are many more opportunities to engage with other people and with the environment (shops, cafés, shady boulevards) in streets than in parks or plazas and wonders whether urban public parks are becoming places for special categories of people, e.g. children, old people, etc., and the street is the truly representative public open space, the one which the whole population may feel com-

fortable in using. This may be so and has intriguing consequences suggestion worthy of further research.

A final comment on issues of democratic provision for and access to public open space must touch briefly on funding: who pays and who benefits? The costs of managing open space continue to create challenges for urban authorities and much has been made of the American experience, where "Friends of the Park" groups have taken on fund-raising, management and other support activities. But there may be problems here too, despite the laudable engagement of "stakeholders" in their local parks. Different interest groups may have different agendas (a classic case in New York's Central Park involved a conflict between birdwatchers, who wanted to maintain certain vegetation cover, and those interested in native woodlands, who wanted to remove the exotic shrub layer). Much valuable work may be carried out by volunteers, and any fund-raising is usually greatly welcomed, but such groups can thereby also become "proprietors" in a way which may exclude others, marginalising those without the additional time or money to contribute.

3. The urban open space network as social space

Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force report (1999) says "to achieve urban integration means thinking of urban open space not as an isolated unit—be it a street, park or square—but as a vital part of urban landscape with its own specific set of functions. Public space should be conceived of as an outdoor room within a neighbourhood, somewhere to relax, and enjoy the urban experience, a venue for a range of different activities, from outdoor eating to street entertainment; from sport and play areas to a venue for civic or political functions; and most importantly of all a place for walking or sitting-out. Public spaces work best when they establish a direct relationship between the space and the people who live and work around it" (p. 57).

To landscape architects and urban designers, this is nothing new, but it is interesting to see the ways in which the urban landscape network is conceived by Rogers' team. He identifies three main factors as central drivers of change:

- the technical revolution, centred on information technology and global to local networks connecting people;

- the ecological threat, with its implications for the importance of sustainable development;
- the social transformation, with life patterns reflecting increasing life expectancy and new lifestyle choices.

Politically, the pressure has been for the projected 19% increase in British households, 1996–2021, to be concentrated as much as possible in urban areas. The arguments are familiar: enhancing the urban fabric by increasing the density of new housing development and by using brown- rather than green-field sites; developing more mixed-use, diverse and compact urban cores; reducing the number and distance of travel-to-work

journeys; ensuring urban densities and distribution can support appropriate public transport infrastructure; encouraging pedestrian, cycle and public transport use and introducing car-free zones or limited vehicular access to core urban areas. It is interesting to see how closely the models illustrating the Urban Task Force's report (drawn mostly, and with great clarity, by Andrew Wright Associates) mirror Ebenezer Howard's garden city models (Howard, 1898; Hall, 1998), Patrick Geddes' ideas of the 'Neotechnic' order (see Leonard, 1992) and the formalist patterns of Christaller's central place theory (Christaller, 1933; Bird, 1977) (see Figs. 1a, b and 2). It seems that, despite all the rhetoric, we have not moved very far in

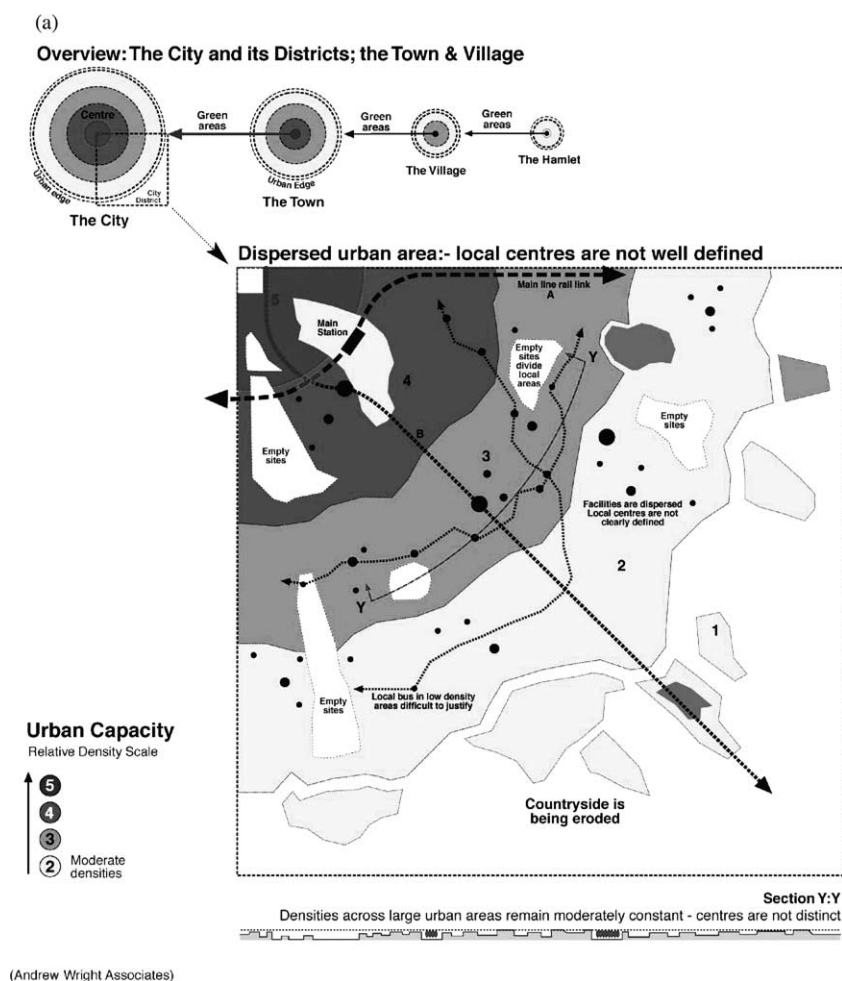


Fig. 1. (a) The urban structure of dispersed and compact cities, from Rogers, 1999, © Andrew Wright Associates. (b) Urban hierarchies, from Rogers, 1999, © Andrew Wright Associates.

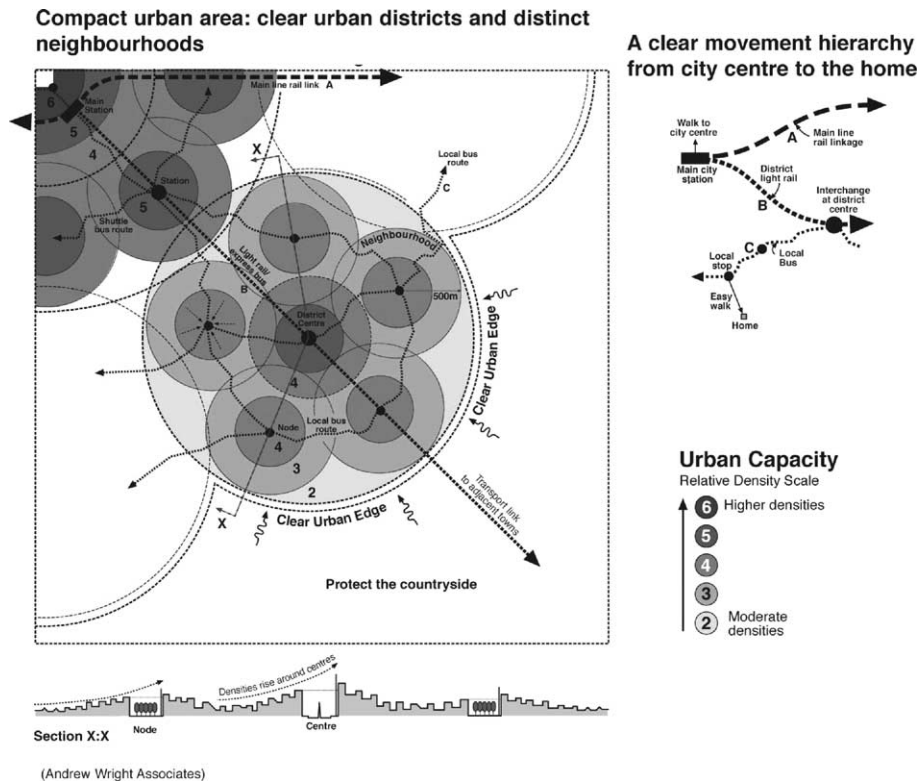


Fig. 1. (Continued).

the last 100 years in our ideas of what urban master-planning should be. Indeed, the report's clarion call for what is called "the 'spatial' masterplan (which) establishes a three-dimensional framework of buildings and public spaces" (p. 73) is no more nor less than the early- to mid-20th century product of the architect/planner, with something of the natural environment included in deference to the early pioneers of ecological principles. This is not to decry the need for good landscape design and land use planning but to comment on the lack of innovation here in both the theory and practice proposed by the Urban Task Force. The most interesting illustration is one that starts to look at the detail of open space networks (Fig. 3); it touches on rather different models, including Forman's (1996) Land Mosaics, but these could have been drawn out more fully in the text, as discussed below. Equally, a more detailed look at the role of streets, parks and other open space typologies (Gehl and Gemzøe, 2001) might have yielded

greater insight into the function each might and should perform.

Corraliza's studies of Spanish urban spaces (2000) highlight the important and changing role that culture plays in our use of open space. In Spain, as in many Mediterranean countries, there is a long tradition of promenading in the street—Barcelona's Ramblas is a prime such location—whereas in Britain, and perhaps in other more northern countries, the promenade has conventionally (since the 18th century at least) taken place in the Royal or public park. Thus, Britain has had a tradition of the park as a place to "see and be seen" which is perhaps matched by the street in other cultures. In an increasingly internationalised European society, we should be asking questions about this. Are British habits becoming more Mediterranean, as we embrace the pavement café culture across Europe, and should British open space planning be modified accordingly, or should it cling to distinctive ways of using space that need

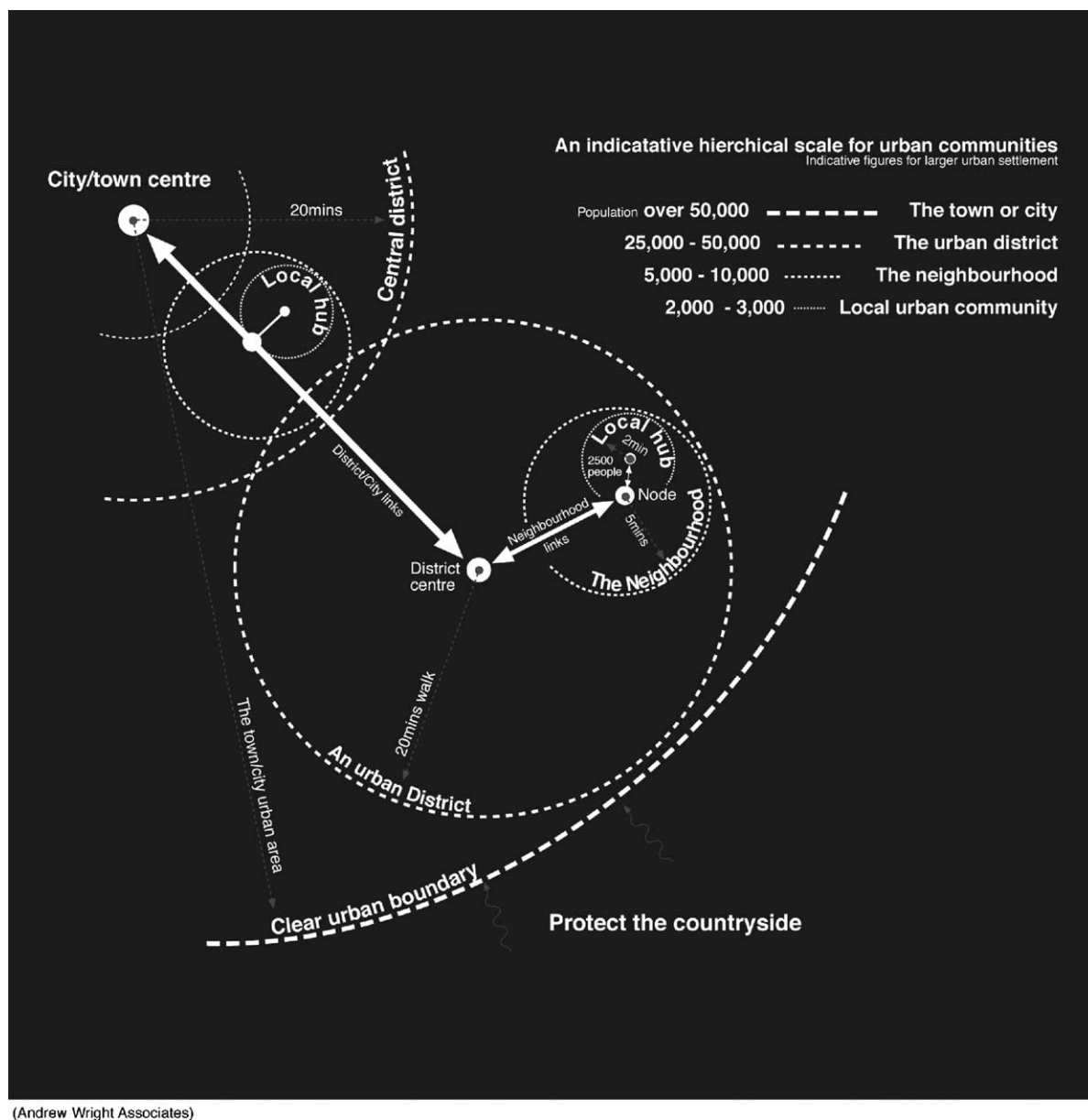


Fig. 2. Linking urban neighbourhoods and communities, from Rogers, 1999, © Andrew Wright Associates.

to be enhanced and reinforced? We have worried so much in recent years about the distinctiveness of our countryside landscapes and our buildings but very little attention has yet been paid to culturally appropriate patterns of urban landscape design and use.

4. The need for a refuge and contact with “nature”

Whether or not the street takes on new, or renewed, roles within society, it is clear that access to some form of “nature” is a fundamental human need and therefore, a vitally important part of access to open space.

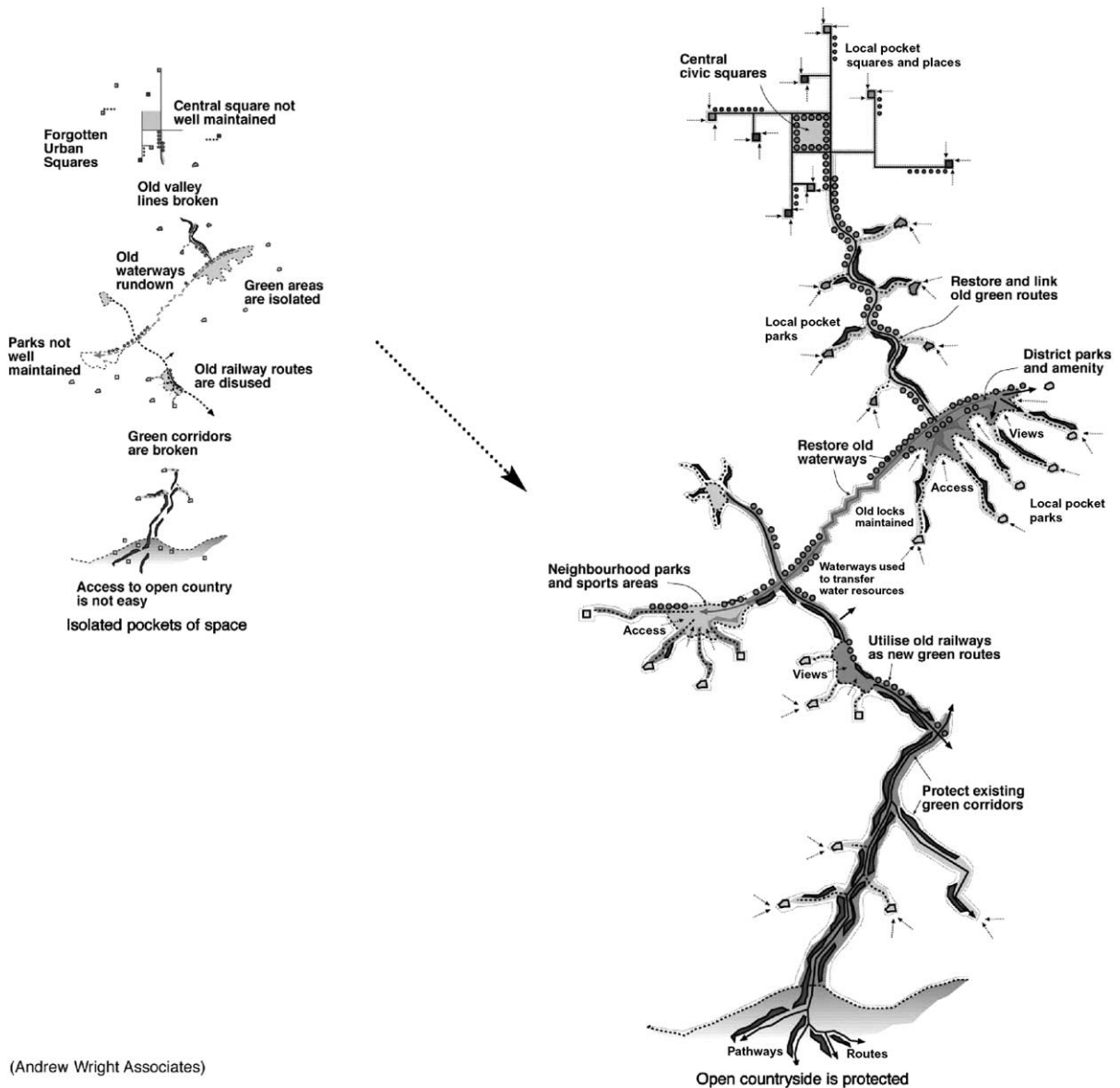


Fig. 3. Open space networks, from Rogers, 1999, © Andrew Wright Associates.

Much has been said elsewhere about the psychological benefits of access to nature in the city, from F L Olmsted onwards (Ward Thompson, 1998; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) which suggest that failure to provide such natural relief within the urban environment will have substantial health costs in the long run. At a different level of concern for people's well-being,

the way social use of space interacts with the need for "natural" spaces is one which raises interesting challenges in terms of open space planning and quality of life. Today, for many people in cities, the park is a place which resonates with concepts of the original "garden" and where contact with nature may have a metaphysical or spiritual dimension, even if only at

the subconscious level; what does this mean for social use of such spaces?

Public parks have been described as places for “the meeting of strangers” (indeed, it has been argued that there are few other places in modern society where there is a possibility for strangers to interact, regardless of background, financial status, ethnicity, etc., Ward Thompson, 1998) but, in a busy urban context, is the public park the one place where people can actually be “private”, lost in the anonymity of the crowd? Ken Worpole has commented: “In the interviews conducted with park users in the UK for the *Park Life* report (1995). . . many people said that they visited the public park for privacy now often unavailable in the media-dominated home” (Worpole, 2000, p. 20). It allowed for an intimate personal space or time, “a way of regaining an interior world”. Worpole goes further: “A wooded, undulating terrain seems more conducive to human spell-making and intimacy than a world of hard surfaces—although there is much evidence that we can also find forms of intimacy and belonging in the urban crowd, in the public square or on the outdoor café terrace” (p. 22). Although Worpole believes that the modern city needs both wooded parks and urban squares, he has highlighted Marc Augé’s (1995) observation that in the controlled spaces of modern urban commerce and design—shopping malls, airports, even some high streets—there is an automatic assumption of guilt about anybody not engaged in purposeful consumer behaviour. In contrast, he says, the free world of the public park has always evoked a pre-lapsarian world of innocence and *autonomy* (my italics).

As has been noted in a study of American parks (Ward Thompson, 1998), the symbolism of the park as refuge or paradise is deeply embedded in our cultural histories and our psyche, and thus, crimes which take place in parks assume a shock value out of all proportion to the likelihood of such crimes on adjacent streets. We cling to the notion, perhaps subconsciously, that the park is a place of freedom and non-threatening nature, yet for many a park can also be a place of fear and anxiety. Burgess (1995) has demonstrated how women and ethnic minorities may feel excluded from wooded and secluded parkland landscapes because they worry about being attacked or getting lost. While children may enjoy the freedom that a natural environment offers for play and manipulation of their

environment (in making dens, for example—their own ‘private’ worlds, see Titman, 1994), the very qualities that make for this freedom can also be perceived as dangerous, threatening, or at the very least, unsettling.

So we have here intriguing pair of apparent contradictions:

- the park or square as a public place for the meeting of strangers is also a place where people can be intimate, anonymous, and therefore private;
- the qualities of wooded parkland are desired because of their natural, intimate and manipulable qualities and yet are also feared because of this element of freedom and wilderness which imply lack of control.

I suggest that it is precisely the tension between these polarities which create what is pleasurable in thinking about and using open space and this has parallels with the Kaplans’ (1989) concepts in the psychology of landscape aesthetics.

The detailed constructs of different social groups and individuals are likely to vary significantly, however, and in researching this further such factors must be considered. What is intimate and intriguing to one person at one time may be perceived as threatening or unkempt at another time. Worpole has argued (see DETR 1999) for more investment in management and maintenance of public open space, and perhaps for a rather conventional view of what a park should look like. He believes that urban parks work best when the integrity of the original vision is maintained, and they offer, in Worpole’s words, the prospect of a “beautiful, ornamental, horticultural experience”, as opposed to a wilder vision of urban “nature” promoted by writers such as Chris Baines (1999). Is paradise a neat and safe place of carefully tended flowers or a more untamed experience?

5. Green networks

Baines (1999) does not necessarily promote the idea that all urban parks should be wild, although he has argued against parks which are no good to anyone, “deserts” of mown grass and a few standard trees. What Baines has argued for is the recognition of value in the waste lots, the derelict, gap sites awaiting redevelopment but currently not managed,

where opportunist weeds spring up and a sense of the uncontrolled makes for an air of excitement. For pre-adolescents, this may be the one place where it is acceptable (or at least tolerated) for them to break sticks and branches, to learn about the physical properties of things by testing them to destruction; for adolescents it may be the one place where they can “hang out” without being under the disapproving eye of authority. The real countryside offers rich opportunities for such interaction with the natural environment, an interaction perhaps necessary for our full human development but one that is considered vandalism or antisocial behaviour in any formal park and therefore denied legitimacy.

But can Baines’s “wildside” places be ecologically rich as well as places for a certain robust kind of use by children and young teenagers? (And can it even be safe for the latter?) Wildlife experts recognise the value of urban parks, especially larger ones, and public authorities have included them in a number of Biodiversity Action Plans (e.g. that for [Birmingham and The Black Country, 2000](#)) but are the non-park places (old railway sidings, gap sites, cemeteries etc.) better for biodiversity than the conventional municipal park, however well-maintained (and most of them, in Britain at least, are currently not well maintained)? To date there has been much discussion on these matters but rather less comparative research. The functional value of such indeterminate areas of open space is discussed further under the title “loose-fit places”, but it is worth looking at some visions of what the wilder side of urban greenspace might be like.

One version of a more ecological approach to urban parks suggests that the vegetation be managed differently than at present, where ecological processes are usually arrested in an unchanging state. A different management philosophy ([Balmori, 1993](#); [Sagan and Margulis, 1993](#)) might encourage the cyclical nature of plant growth and succession, erosion and siltation of water bodies, etc. **Parks could be allowed to change over time in the kind of homeorrhetic or long-term, cyclical way that natural succession follows**, rather than be subject to the homeostatic regulation of equilibrium around an unchanging norm. Park use might follow a pattern of patches of different stages in the ecological cycle, depending on whether the use needed open space (e.g. for picnics), woody invasive scrubland (e.g. for adventure playgrounds or

mountain biking) or more mature woodland (e.g. for walks or nature study). It might be argued that existing urban parks are too small and the ecological cycle too long term to make this proposal workable in practice, but it would be interesting to explore further the realistic possibilities for such an approach. Certainly, if we look at a larger framework of open spaces which encompasses more than individual parks and includes canals, abandoned railway lines, etc., such an approach would seem to have real potential. A significant part of such networks might be linear parks or corridors, where the principle of the rich ecotone can be reflected in the maximisation of the length of park edges. Changing cycles of growth and decay would give different parts of the park network their individual character and invite different uses. Pollution- and trampling-tolerant exotics, growing up alongside native species, might be accepted as expressions of the multi-racial, many-faceted society in which we now live.

Such places might be an addition to formal parks, rather than a substitute for them, being full of pioneer and opportunistic vegetation which removes toxins from the soil (perhaps for re-harvesting), invades derelict lots and breaks down waste, protects the integrity of water courses and encourages the functioning of natural systems within the urban fabric. Some might not be at all comfortable for human use, but would reclaim the man-made for “nature” and act as a counterpoint to the controlled urban scene. Some places might provide opportunities for functions not well served by our present park systems.

Other recent ecological concepts upon which we can draw are those of sensitivity to initial conditions, contingency and chaos theory. [Alington \(1998\)](#) has usefully summarised these, recognising what they mean for landscape designers: that whilst we can attempt to design for a desired process, we can never be sure that our intentions will be realised—we can only really control pattern and hope that process will follow. This is as true for human processes as for other ecological systems. Minor variations in the initial conditions of our public parks and open spaces can dramatically alter their development over time. Unusual ‘contingency events’ can deflect, disrupt, halt or accelerate processes. Natural systems appear to exhibit chaotic behaviour and it seems reasonable to conclude that these include human ecosystems, and in particular the

ecology of open space systems we manage and with which we interact. Thresholds where changes in behaviour occur dramatically and abruptly are potentially always present. The issue of scale is also important—we cannot assume that relationships that exist at one scale of time and space will be the same at another. The challenge is to determine at what level of detail we should be looking for the ‘grain’, or smallest unit, of public open space, and the ‘extent’, or upper limit of our system. Is the grain determined by the size of an individual tree, a private garden or back street, or the habitat of an urban fox or vole? Is extent determined by neighbourhood, city, watershed or biogeographical region? Does the pattern of dimension at different scales exhibit the properties of fractals or is this not a useful concept for planning open space? These are questions which have yet to be adequately addressed but which seem to point the way to a truly contemporary reinterpretation of the ideas of green networks.

6. Open space and the information age

Although information technology does allow for a greater flexibility in terms of location, particularly for some office functions, it is also resulting in new urban concentrations for face-to-face activity. People need human contact and the city is the place for that, even if technology allows us to do otherwise if we choose. In Britain, a significant proportion of newly-formed households over the next 20 years is expected to be from minority ethnic groups and up to 80% to be single-person households (Rogers, 1999). We are thus looking forward to an urban society where, perhaps, more people are living in relative proximity than ever before, but where the regular daily social contact that comes from sharing homes or living in culturally homogenous districts no longer pertains. It is an intriguing prospect—a close-knit society of strangers.

Modern telecommunications and information technologies mean that our community is increasingly a ‘virtual’ one, based on friendships and shared interests regardless of the geography of individuals. But although we may have regular contact with friends who live thousands of miles away, we can also easily communicate with large numbers of local contacts. The Internet has allowed groups to plan and organise

events and open space use much more readily than ever before. Whether it is a rally against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, involving tens of thousands of people, or simply an informal game of Frisbee in the local park among friends, e-mail and the mobile telephone allow such use of public open space to be organised very quickly, with very low overhead costs, and (as we have seen recently) very effectively. So, although the electronic revolution means we no longer need to go into the streets of our towns and cities to find out the news or to arrange to meet people and organise events (actually, we have not needed to do that for several decades if not centuries now), it does mean that we can now use those streets, squares and parks with much greater confidence that we will find what we want there, meet whom we want, be able to do what we choose. Given that we are social animals, and that we crave real contact with each other and with nature, perhaps public open space will be more, and not less, used in future than it has in recent decades.

What of more radical visions of the electronic age and its impact on urban open space? There will certainly be opportunities to explore what “intelligent” landscape design (as opposed to building design) might deliver. Baird (2000) has suggested that truly responsive landscapes will include opportunities for self-mending paving systems or for seating to open up, or disappear into the paving, as and when we need it. Responsive information screens or surfaces will help us navigate unknown places as well as, perhaps, giving us up-to-the minute data on aspects of the local microclimate or wildlife. Developments in the creation of virtual environments will lead to an intriguing, parallel world of virtual, four-dimensional space and time; perhaps in this context the value of engagement with the *real* environment will become more precious. There is no doubt that new technologies will allow us to enjoy open space in ways that are particularly well-suited to our personal preferences and to the current trend towards individual expression, despite the fact that urban society and its demands are becoming increasingly diverse as a whole.

But how will we relate to the landscape around our towns and cities? We shall certainly have access to more information than ever before about our countryside, should we choose to look for it, but how much

will we actually understand about it? It seems likely that, as agriculture becomes ever more intensified in Europe, the countryside will divide into areas of industrial-scale agriculture, which most people will never visit, areas of cultural landscapes, conserved as historical parks of some sort, and areas of “wilderness” where people will go for active and solitary recreation. The latter two categories are certain to be popular but how much contact will the urban dweller have with the land as a productive resource?

7. Growing things in town

There have been many arguments produced for the value of community gardens or allotments in cities. [Francis \(1987\)](#) sees them as a socially desirable provision which engages certain groups in the use of public open space who would not otherwise use a park. There is also evidence that certain immigrant groups find the ability to grow familiar plants and vegetables an important link with the experience they may have left behind, perhaps in a rather different cultural context. It may indeed be seen by such people as an economic necessity to grow some of their own food, a fact we often forget if we are acculturated to a society of fast-food and supermarket convenience.

Philanthropists and those interested in child development, from Goethe, Steiner and Geddes onwards, have insisted on the importance of allowing children to experience growing plants and making the connection between that and the food they eat ([Macdonald, 1992](#)). In an urbanised society with an industrialised agriculture, this becomes harder than ever to achieve unless allotments or school gardens are accorded a key place in the structure of urban open space. Indeed, there are some that argue that the intensification of urban densities which is advocated by most urban designers, including Rogers, is not necessarily the best model for sustainable living and that the provision of personalised garden or allotment spaces within the urban fabric is what people want and need, both for psychological and for practical well-being.

Whether or not the entire urban fabric should be modelled around personal or community allotment spaces, there is a strong case for some flexibility within the urban structure to allow for such uses or for other,

perhaps less conventional, activities to arise and to wax or wane as the social fabric changes. There is a need for “loose-fit” places as well as those that are precisely planned.

8. “Loose-fit” places

[Franck Dovey, Rivlin and others \(2000\)](#) have explored “loose-fit” environments, which can allow for a variety of functions and which are often undesignated, unregulated, spaces. Ruins, according to Louis Kahn, are free from the “tyranny of function” and left over, abandoned or ruined space often allows for a proliferation of activities that is more culturally inclusive than designed spaces. “Found” spaces often serve people’s needs (and a wide range of needs) in ways that designed spaces do not. They can give opportunities for privacy in anonymity, as has been mentioned earlier, but perhaps especially offer a place for the marginalised in our society—age groups or social or ethnic groups not welcome in conventional, well-supervised parks (see the discussion on [Baines, 1999](#), above). They may be conveniently located and offer a sense of freedom but also of safety for some.

Dovey, in exploring Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) phenomenological approaches to space typology, has talked about the difference between rooted, fixed, constrained spaces and those that are slippery, unconstrained, nomadic or migrant (the “striated” versus the “smooth”). Approaches to the former have focused on visual order, whereas the latter are associated with the haptic—the sense of touch. The two have always co-existed and each may move in the other’s direction or the two may enfold each other over time. Within the concept of these “loose” spaces, it is interesting to explore what qualities make for such spaces of freedom and escape. Dovey associates them with the process of “becoming”, with a liminal, edge condition, one that shifts in quality and in space. Loose spaces, he says, aren’t necessarily places with no rules but places where we are continually inventing new rules, e.g. each time children start playing a game, they set up a place with their own rules, which may be tightly constraining but invented anew by them that day.

Freedom is always risky; in slippery, loose spaces, we need to be haptically involved to negotiate our

way safely in space. Nonetheless, the need for places of rich experience and for risk, not just for adults but for children and for childhood reminiscences, is particularly important. Work on children's perceptions of their environments (Hart, 1979, Halseth and Doddridge, 2000) has shown that loose-fit places can often provide important places of escape, especially for people with troubled childhoods. Even for those of secure backgrounds, the personal autonomy of children has been dramatically reduced over the last 20 years (Hillman et al., 1990); outdoor play, particularly in a relatively unconstrained environment, is a form of risk management which can stimulate feelings of being self-directed and in control (Ellis, 1973), and these give great pleasure to children, indeed to us all. Roger Hart's seminal work (1979) has shown that children find and "make" places for themselves which are quite different from those identified by adults; we need to know more about how children understand potential risks and hazards and how to allow for unstructured and challenging play in the outdoor environment in ways that parents and teachers are prepared to accept. It is likely that loose, semi-wild or derelict spaces—perhaps very small ones, not necessarily the extensive "wild" spaces discussed above as part of urban ecological networks but places much more indeterminate, local, and often shifting in location—are part of the answer.

The key to loose-fit spaces is how they are used and designed to be used, therefore the illusion that open, empty space is not constrained is incorrect—Beijing's Tiananmen Square may look very open but its use is strictly constrained. Dovey (2000) suggests that Koolhaas and Tschumi have got it wrong in Schouwburgplein and La Villette, for similar reasons—the emphasis on static, visual qualities of space do not in fact make for loose and free use of space, but one where use is highly controlled and limited.

9. Conclusion

What seems clear in looking to the future is that new technology will be harnessed to satisfy old and unchanging needs but, also, new patterns of open space networks are being conceptualised which reflect new scientific and cultural understandings. We need precise plans to define artistic visions, function-specific space,

and the neat, safe and decorative parks which offer equity of access for all. But these plans will be within the fuzzy framework of an open space network which is dynamic in aesthetic and ecological status, allowing for a larger mosaic, a patchwork of changing, loose-fit landscapes.

If we adopt Forman's approach to evaluating the ecological contribution that an open space network makes in a city, we should be prepared to look at the patch size, corridor network and mosaics that *Homo sapiens* requires to flourish, and not just apply such concepts to species other than our own. We need to examine the human recreational habitat in a holistic way. In this regard, there is, more than ever, a recognition of the value of wild spaces, informal, loose-fit, sometimes messy places, that turn out often to be as valuable as the tidy and the formal. Intelligent landscapes of the future may allow us to enjoy and make diverse use of our urban streets and squares in ways that are personally satisfying in a pluralist society, but we shall still need spaces where we can engage with natural processes, where we can intervene and change the landscape, and where we can watch things grow.

The element of time is always important in landscape architecture; just as the designs for some urban squares may have a very short life-span, so we may need to adopt a much longer time-frame for engaging effectively with the entirety of the ecological networks which structure our towns and cities. Some loose-fit spaces may move around over time within our urban fabric, reflecting the dynamic, mixed, sometimes ambiguous landscapes which are likely to develop as expansive networks of infrastructure slice through and re-knit the existing fabric. Some residual spaces can become the test bed for new ideas (Davidson, 1999) so that we can forge a symbiotic relationship between the biological complexity of the landscape and the social and functional relevance of human infrastructure.

Ultimately, I see open space in cities as places to celebrate cultural diversity, to engage with natural processes and to conserve memories. Urban open space must provide a place for the meeting of strangers and a place where one can transcend the crowd and be anonymous or alone. And in all of this, the urban park will continue to serve a central function in society's self definition.

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