

Large Urban Parks – Past, Present and Future

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Large urban parks present huge benefits to city dwellers: meeting places, recreation, health, climate change mitigation, clean air, clean water, and much more. From royal gardens the idea sprung up in mid 19th century in New York and Paris to bestow such amenities also on common citizens. Large urban green spaces are especially important in large cities, where inhabitants have long ways to travel to rural nature. By accident, more than conscious planning, large urban parks have come into existence since then: left over land, military training fields, disbanded airports and dumps have evolved or been turned into large parks. Present rapid urbanization is now, however, threatening past achievements and remaining, unexploited areas in many cities around the world. Building new cities, large parks are only occasionally part of the scheme. For up-coming Habitat III this is a challenge that must be met.

The past

The city of Stockholm, capital of Sweden, housed 60.000 people in mid 18th century. The city was known for its filth, fleas, fighting and general unhealthy conditions. [Slide 1: Map or overview of Stockholm incl. Djurgården ca. 1750]. However, farmland, forests and lakes were not far away and provided fresh air, a bit of quiet and complementary food and energy supplies: berries, mushrooms, wood, even game. This was the situation in most cities around the world at the time. But when cities grew the need for nature, fresh air, rest, berry picking and much more could not be met in this way. That is when – mid 19th century – ideas about creating green spaces in cities started to grow. In Stockholm the first public parks were royal parks that opened to the public mid 18th century (Kungsträdgården and Humlegården) under the pressure from enlightenment and popular demand. Then it took more than a hundred years for the city of Stockholm to create its own parks. In late 19th century two, rather small parks were created (Strömparterren and Berzeli park). [Slide 2: Kungsträdgården, early 18th century]

The nearness of Djurgården, a former royal hunting ground, just outside the city, compensated for many years the lack of public parks in the city. Early 19th century King Jean Baptiste Bernadotte opened it up for the general public. Today it constitutes an important part of the Royal National City Park, inaugurated in 1995, together with other areas that previously had been military exercising fields, botanical gardens, farmland, hunting grounds and royal parks. [Slide 3: Map of the Royal National City Park set in metropolitan Stockholm context]

Other cities have similar stories. Maybe the world's first **public** parks were created in Liverpool, England, in the western part of the world. I must confess my ignorance as to the eastern and southern parts of the world. In 1842 Princess park was opened, a 45 hectare park designed to promote the sale of surrounding grand Georgian-style houses. In 1847 Birkenhead park opened, supposedly the first publicly funded civic park in the world, almost 100 hectare large. [Slide 4: Birkenhead park]. Both had been designed by Joseph Paxton.

Frederick Law Olmsted visited Birkenhead in 1850, was inspired by Paxton's designs, that actually in turn were inspired by Regent's and Hyde Park's designs in London, and was commissioned in 1857 to design what nowadays is known as Central Park in New York.

Charles I had opened Hyde park to the general public already in 1637. Its worth was proven in 1665 during the Great Plague, when people fled to the park in the hope of escaping the disease. Homeless people have from time to time used to park to sleep in. [Slide 5: Homeless sleeping in Hyde park]

Bois de Boulogne in Paris was created between 1850 and 1858 and is 2½ times larger than Central Park. Commissioned by Napoleon III and a part of the great development of Paris, drawn up by Georges-Eugène Haussman. Olmsted could refer to the French initiative.

From "what's good for the real estate business" to enlightenment and social reform" large urban parks were advocated as part of the democratization of the society. In Germany the concept "Volkspark" was born in opposition to "Volksgarten" and flourished in the beginning of the 20th century. "Volksgarten"

is the nicely designed, filled with flower beds, centrally located park, meant for strolls. The “Volkspark” meant the creation of relatively large parks, less esthetically designed than the Volksgarten, based on the natural landscape. It had room for a large set of activities. One example is Rivierenhof in Antwerp. In such a park there is a mix of sport arenas, playgrounds, beautiful flower beds and fountains, amusement parks, a bit of an English park, race courses for horses etc. Another great example of a “Volkspark” is Amsterdamse Bos, developed in the 1920s and 30’s by an army of 20.000 unemployed. Less valuable agricultural land was turned into a landscape park, with much nature, but also sports arenas – for example for rowing – and a goat farm. [Slide 6: Amsterdamse Bos built by an army of unemployed]

The Present

Today Rivierenhof is remade into a nature park – activities are located to the periphery, nature occupying the larger part of the park in the middle. This reflects a shift of argument in favor of promoting health and biodiversity and mitigating climate change. You will find new initiatives for creating large urban parks, landscape parks, peri-urban parks and strengthening the green infrastructure. This set of arguments for large urban parks emanates from increasing awareness of the threats to conditions for living on planet Earth. In late 20th century the UN launched the Ecosystem Millennium Assessment, from the beginning of the 21st century climate change has been in focus and with Habitat III coming up in October this year our minds are turned to the world-wide explosion of cities and what that means for human living conditions. Now there is work going on for the creation or the further development of large parks in many countries, for example Iran, Germany, Colombia and the US, in or close to large cities. It isn’t national parks, with wild, untouched nature far from urban areas. It isn’t regular city parks, such as Washington Square in NY or the Hibiya Park in Tokyo. Instead, it is landscape parks – a relatively new concept – large, continuous green/partly blue areas in large cities and conurbations. They often include some residential areas, roads and rails. An early example is Lee Valley Park, created in 1966, stretching along Lee Valley to the north and east of London. Fedenatur is an association that organizes several “peri-urban parks”, located in Barcelona, Milano, Lyon and other cities in southern Europe. The peri-urban park borders to the city outskirts and aims at preserving the landscape just outside the city. It may be forests or farmland. The Colserolla Park outside of Barcelona is one such park. [Slide 8: Collserola park] In Africa we have the example of Ibadan, Nigeria, where an area that was formerly overgrown and inaccessible has been turned into a cherished spot for vacation.

The 2nd to 4th of September Ekoparken Association and WWF, Sweden, had a conference take place in Stockholm, Sweden, demonstrating the importance of large urban parks and providing many examples of ongoing work, such as Fresh Kills, south of Manhattan [Slide 7: Fresh Kills], the Green Belt of the Aburra Valley in Medellin, Colombia [Slide 9: Medellin] and Singapore Gardens by the bay. [Slide 9: Singapore Gardens] In Beira, the second largest city in Mozambique, a large city park with lots of various activities is now being planned along a river that runs through the city. And in China Qian Hai Water City, falling back on earlier examples of “water cities”, is being planned. The conference had participants coming from 27 countries and six continents, showing examples of the work to protect and create large urban parks.

These kind of parks will house varied sorts of land, since the land in close proximity to large conurbations is strongly affected by human activities of many kinds. There can be some relatively untouched and wild parts. Other parts will be regular city parks for strolls and doves, and others still will be large English parks. But there may also be left over land. Peter Clark, an urban historian, is now focusing his research on waste land, land left over.

Some of these areas may have a protection, others not, they just happen not to have been exploited. There is a collection of old royal hunting grounds, military exercising fields, disbanded industrial sites, waste dumps, swamps and hilly areas that make up the patch-work of large parks in cities around the globe. Add to those larger areas church-yards, villa gardens, play-grounds, boulevards etc. Large urban parks constitutes an effort to take one solid grip on the totality of urban green – the green infrastructure – and to ask: what is its worth, although it is not “God’s pure nature”? Large urban parks poses the question: is it enough with a lot of fragmented green, or is some really large green area also needed to

assist biodiversity, prevent flooding, provide fresh and cool air and substantive recreation? [Slide 9: Ekoparken, as seen from Kaknästornet]

The Future

What is the future of large urban parks? On the one hand we see some grand, new schemes for large urban parks, like the ones mentioned above, and there are many more. But on the other hand we see sad examples of how once great parks have been neglected and successively been run down and partly exploited. A large park in Brazzaville, the Republic of Congo, has been diminished and is now left in ruins, with little or no up-keep. The suggested way to save the remnants is to close it off by a large fence, which is contrary to make the park more accessible and used. In the Iranian part of Kurdistan in the city of Sanandaj a large park has been cut through by a highway, which limits access and deteriorates experiences of visiting the park. [Slide 10: Park in Sanandaj with highway] In some parks work is now undertaken to mend these damages. Ecoducts - wild life passages – are constructed to strengthen biodiversity. [Slide 11: Ecoduct in Kawabate park, Australia]. Green land lying in metropolitan regions exerts a tremendous temptation on builders and politicians to exploit. Substantial encroachments have been made on Lee Valley park for the Olympics 2012, on the Tijuca park in Rio for the Olympics this year, on The Royal National City Park for the Stockholm university. There are many more examples. Large Urban parks risk being slowly but surely nibbled away.

Most city developments around the world pays very little attention to green infrastructure. For rather obvious reasons this is true for the substantive informal city settlements that are taking place in Africa and Asia. But also when cities are planned, planners take very little interest in setting aside large green areas. [Slide 12: Anonymous city of high-rises] The urban sprawl continues in different fashions in the rich and the poor world.

This means that most of the next 3,5 billion people that will become city dwellers will be deprived of nature, of the stillness and silence of a walk in the forest, of the healing effect of the wind in the willow, of the sense of place and identity that a natural landscape will give you. New cities will be even more vulnerable to heat and floods.

Will the European Union Green Infrastructure Strategy change this course?

Will United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable change this course?

Will UN Habitat III The New Urban Agenda change this course?

[Slide 13: International conventions]