

Threats to the *Genius Loci* of the Public Parks
Saving the Historic Urban Parks of the 19th Century

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Abstract. This paper is deals with the threats to the urban parks laid out in the 19th century - and with the ways of saving them. Many of these parks are still popular with the public, but the quality of their design and maintenance has declined over the years. The efforts to save their original characteristics have come very late. Yet, these parks are an important part of the 19th century town planning, and saving their *genius loci* would be very important to the fabric of the respective cities. It would also contribute to the cause of the historic gardens and sites in general.

The historic public parks have begun to attract attention among the garden historians only fairly recently. None of the over 50 articles published in ICOMOS's *Jardins and sites historiques* in 1993 dealt with them, but a certain interest had already been gathering momentum. The decline in their maintenance had been recognized in some countries at that date (Conway and Lambert 1988). Many parks have also been renovated in one way or other in the intervening years, but the measures taken have often been of *ad hoc* nature. This is understandable considering the amount of work that had to be done just to pull some of them back from the brink of dereliction. It is now time to take stock and try to get a clearer view how to proceed with the preservation of the other parks so that as much possible of their original characteristics can be saved, and that the *genius loci* of each one will go on speaking not only to us, but also to the future generations.

The recent interest in the public parks has sparked conferences, seminars, and exhibitions which is very welcome. It is, however, still evident that especially the aspects connected with the design and the choices of vegetation in the 19th century public parks seldom get such a thorough treatment that would be necessary for the understanding the many-sided and intricate ideas that determined their layouts. The 19th century was an era with a great variety of trends, planning principles and also of new plants and materials, not to speak of the many types of activities that people expected to find in them. We need to acknowledge the fact that the garden history of that period is much more divers and complex than that of the 18th century or of more simple designs in the 20th century.

1. 19th Century Public Parks

Until the 19th century there were few public parks in the modern sense of the word. The “Promenades” of most towns consisted mainly of straight avenues lined with two or more rows of deciduous trees, most often lindens or elms (Hennebo 1979). The new type public park, with lawns, shrubs and a variety of trees planted in informal groups, came to being only in the 19th century. The necessity of the parks for the recreation of townspeople was then gradually recognized in all civilized countries, and they were consequently given an undisputed role in town planning projects. The parks were as much part and parcel of the democratic and philanthropic ideals of the 19th century as the public libraries and the development of general hospital systems.

New public parks were continuously being created all through the 19th century, and their role and designs were eagerly discussed, cf. for instance “*The Parks, Promenades & Gardens of Paris Described and Considered in Relation to the Wants of our Own Cities, and of Public and Private Gardens*” by William Robinson published in London in 1869.

2. The Threats to the Genius Loci

Many causes can have brought about the decline of a given park, viz. partial overbuilding of the area, changes in the surrounding environment, or the widening of the adjoining streets. Only the ubiquitous reasons that play a part in these unfortunate developments can be pointed out here.

2.1. CHANGES OF LAYOUT

It was mostly only minor alterations that took place in the parks of the 19th century during the same era. Large scale changes, that may have affected their character very much indeed, occurred later on, in the 20th century. These were often due to a desire to simplify the design to save maintenance costs, but in more affluent cities the parks were also given partial make-overs in order to incorporate new features like rose gardens or sports fields. These measures need, however, not have changed the basic character of a park, and therefore not hinder its renewal of the original design (Stürmer 1992).

2.2. INTRODUCTION OF NEW ELEMENTS

The introduction of new elements like play equipment, transformers, billboards, or a group of rhododendrons can lead to harmful consequences. Such isolated additions, to be distinguished from the more considered changes of layouts referred to above, should never be carried out *ad hoc*,

for they seem regularly to lead to adjustments and further additions like new paths, seats, and lighting standards, and so to the obscuring of original layouts in a piecemeal way. Such processes begin imperceptibly, but they are difficult and costly to eradicate later on.

Also elements that are generally considered enhancing like a new water feature or an art work, can be detrimental in the same way. Anything sited at a focal point or differing drastically from the colours or materials otherwise used in an old park can disturb its harmony. William Robinson (1878) commented on this fact in connection with Parc Montrouge in Paris stating that it “*has lately been marred of much of its beauty by an attempt to adorn it with statuary, one wretched thing in the centre indeed taking away almost all its grace*”.

2.3. MODERN MAINTENANCE TECHNIQUES

The efforts to cut costs have obliged parks departments to use the so-called labour saving techniques. The use of tractor type lawn mowers has led to the felling of trees planted in groups as well as to the cutting of the lowest branches of other trees to enable the machines to circulate freely. This is disastrous in historic parks where the sight lines and the general character require that certain areas be shady or covered with vegetation to the ground. The conspicuously large wastepaper baskets, eye-sores in any park, are erected at places where it is convenient for the maintenance vehicles to pass. So it is the machines that dictate a good part of the layouts. Similar developments in relation to historic buildings would not be tolerated, and rightly so, yet this goes to show how undervalued our green heritage still is.

The issue of the walks and paths is a case in point. Their width and surface materials were originally very carefully planned. The colour of the gravel alone contributes a lot to the atmosphere of a park. The old walks were gently rounded, “bombees”, and the staff had special tools for keeping them so. Come the asphalted walks, come the depressing monotony. The walks in one public park are the same as in the next; from town to town, from country to country, they are flat, grey, looking worn-out and soon broken. Follow the orders that all the walks have the same width in all the parks of a given town: the width of the municipal sweeping machine. Forget that the walks even in a single park usually had variable widths in the 19th century (see *Fig. 1*).

Other cost reducing measures may have seemed unavoidable in the first place. Ripping off old pavements, taking away steps, drinking wells and finials that were broken and were considered too costly to repair, are small matters as such, but they lead to a gradual erosion of the original substance, so much so that one day it is no longer there and the feeling of leaden sameness reigns in one more public park.

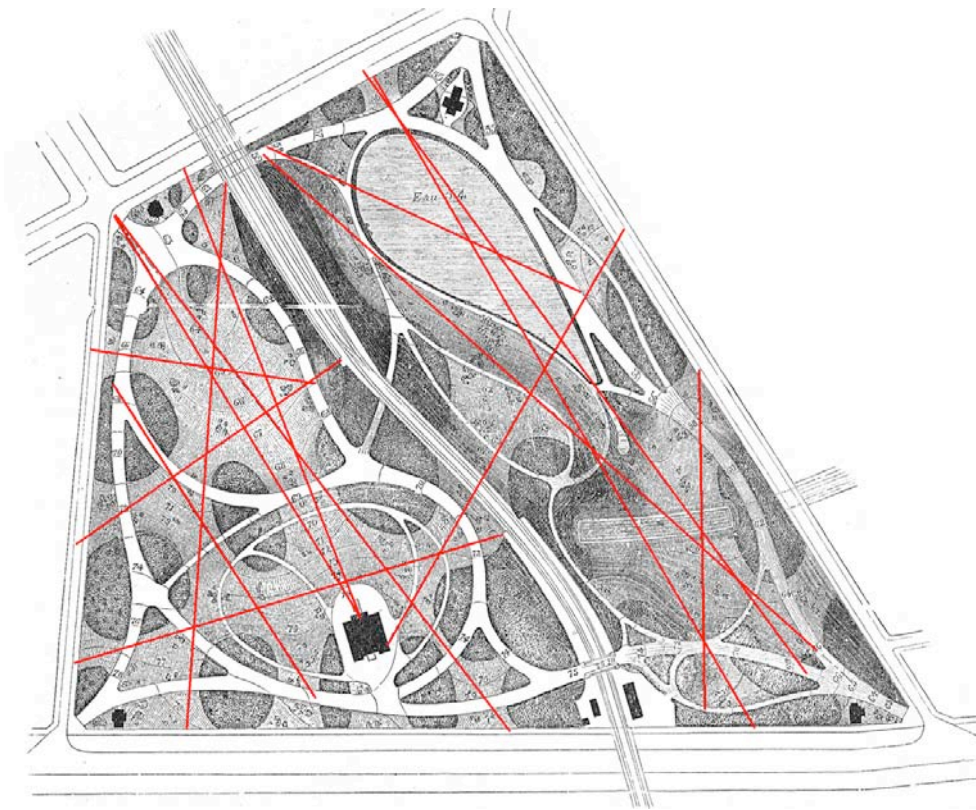


Figure 1. A late 19th park project with sight lines; the lines were drawn in red for this publication. Parc Montsouris, Paris (Ernouf 1886).

2.4. TOO EASY SOLUTIONS

The pollution, ecological problems, and the use of herbicides take their toll of all city parks and they need not be discussed here. Still, I wish to point out that the replacement of diseased trees in old parks needs special sensitivity. When the rows of magnificent old weeping elms at a look-out terrace in Zürich were succumbing to elm disease there was plenty of time to consider which equally handsome trees to plant instead. Replacing them with the cheap and ubiquitous *Acer platanoides* ‘Globosum’ cannot be excused on any grounds. That type of easy solutions are noxious.

2.5. STATUTES AND BY-LAWS

Many parks departments are nowadays obliged to take the cheapest tenders for the renovations as well as for the upkeep of their parks. This means that in many cases well trained employees are being superseded by temporary workforce. Often the latter do not even know the names of the plants they are supposed to be taking care of. Trees wrongly cut, or planted are costly mistakes. An oak mistakenly felled is replaced with two columnar yews, four metres high, at the cost of well over 4 000 CAD each. Add to that the

cost of transports, planting and the machinery involved as well as that of removing the yews in the following year, because they died out. So the maintenance of the historic parks comes expensive? Are there accounts for factoring this kind of wastefulness to compare with the costs of properly trained workforce?

Various EU and other guidelines about the railings, their measurements, and further structures for the safety of the public are also leading to new elements being erected in historic parks that often spoil their visual character.

3. Measures for Saving the Genius Loci

It is still much too often assumed that design of the public parks in 19th century consisted of schematic versions of the landscape gardens of the previous era, *pace* the critics of the early 20th century (Gothein 1926). This is patently wrong. The 18th century landscape gardens were not much admired in the Victorian era, on the contrary (Lefèvre 1867), and the garden architects of the 19th century firmly believed that it was only they who were finding out how to design parks properly. It is now for us to discover and evaluate their work without prejudice. The public park of Paisley, in Scotland, was laid out on geometric lines the “ground there properly admitting no other style”, and the garden architect was believed in so deciding to “have had in mind the safe advice of the poet Pope to consult the genius of the place in all” (E.W. 1868, 474). The author was referring to the very same and famous “Epistle” by Alexander Pope that this conference takes its lead from, and that is generally regarded as one of the very credos for landscape, not geometric, style of gardening.

3.1. CONSIDER THE VIEWS AND SPACES

The views, vistas, and reciprocal vistas were possibly the most important part of parks designed in the 19th century. It was recommended that the garden architect first decide on them, as well as on that which of them were of primary and which of secondary significance. It was only after these decisions that he was to consider how far the terrain had to be modified and how to arrange the planting so that it would frame the views in the best possible way (Ernouf 1886). As the sight lines were often directed towards view points outside the boundaries of the parks their preservation is an extremely precarious issue to deal with. How to protect, for instance, a view of the sea or of the old castle, a view that probably had a decisive role in determining the original overall design? How to prevent houses to be erected near-by that would block the view?

The sight lines were seldom indicated on the project plans. This was not necessary after the areas to be planted had been determined and drawn on them; they would only have made the plans more difficult to decipher

(cf. Fig. 1). Checking about the sight lines now, a hundred or more years later, requires the present day researchers to do very exact *in situ* work.

Parks also consist of series of spaces, which is one of the most misunderstood aspects about them. The public only react negatively to the introduction of a new element that changes the size or the character of a space when the alteration is sudden and radical. So a flower-clock built in 1985 in an old city park of Zürich had to be soon removed, because of the citizens' vociferous protests. On the other hand, the gradual proliferation of bicycle stands in the same park seems to go on almost unnoticed. It is therefore especially important for people doing research work to lay bare all the relevant facts about the spaces in the parks they are studying, as well as by which means they were originally created and in which ways they have later been altered.

The interplay between the sight lines and the spaces must, of course, be studied in great detail, too, because it often determines the atmosphere of the whole park.

3.2. ATTENTION TO VEGETATION

There was a great deal more new plants in the 19th century than in any earlier period, and they were not in the parks only to frame the views and to create spaces, but also for their beauty, exotic appeal as well as for educational purposes. In that way they, and the many different planting styles of the era, reflect the cultural and social aspirations of the 19th century. The garden architects vetted the trees available to them according to their height, width, habit, texture, colour, leaf form, and suitability to express their personal design ideas in context with other trees and shrubs. In a public park the ligneous vegetation was also chosen to be appropriate as to the site and climate of the area. The then parks superintendents were knowledgeable about the plants and they did not want to be criticized for plantings that might not flourish. Nevertheless, many trees planted in the 19th century are now coming to the end of their lifespan, and this is one of the reasons why the study of the parks laid out at that time is particularly urgent.

The original planting plans and the plant lists have seldom survived, and even if they do, they cannot always be trusted. Plants may have been wrongly named – or wrongly delivered – in the first place. So it is necessary always to study the vegetation that still survives *in situ*.

More research is also needed into the choice of flowers, and the siting of the flower groups. They were an integral part of the parks of the 19th century, they cannot not be regarded as mere details. The slights about the “municipal regimentation” of annuals in strident colours, though sadly true about many present-day parks, have too long obscured the fact that such bedding-out was considered to be in bad taste already in the 1830s (Wimmer 1991). In fact many parks of that era had refined planting schemes to start with. There may have been eg cactuses or other plants in muted green tones in the centre of the park which is now dominated by a Pseudo-

Victorian flowerbed with its garish yellow, red, purple, and white colours. Neither were bedding-out, carpet-bedding, and sub-tropical bedding synonymous; the terminology as well as the ideas need to be understood correctly.

It is also necessary to gather precise information about the particular varieties of the flowers used in historic parks. The fact that the older varieties often greatly differ from the present day ones has so far been taken too little account of. The 19th century forms usually have smaller flowers and more graceful habits, and therefore the visual effects produced by them are dissimilar to those of the modern breeds.

3.3. INVENTORIES

Many inventories have only one category for the public parks. This tends to obscure the diverse purposes they were designed for, i.e. the factors that influenced their layouts. When we recognize this we will be more able to preserve the special character of each one. Dividing the parks, for instance, to the following categories might be helpful:

- A. Parks that were laid out as public from the very beginning.
- B. Parks that were designed in connection with public buildings like museums, churches, theatres or railway stations.
- C. Parks that originally had a half private character, eg the grounds of hospitals, hotels, or schools that have either remained half private or been made public later on.
- D. Public parks designed in the 19th century using elements of older gardens or parks.
- E. Churchyards and cemeteries. The latter often represented the first landscaped grounds in many a community.
- F. Public parks created from disused cemeteries and churchyards.
- G. Other designed landscapes, eg arboreta.
- H. Grounds originally created for private families that have been converted to public parks later on. They constitute a category that needs especially sensitive treatment, see below.

When parks were laid for public use, Category A, large numbers of people were expected to visit them. This was reflected in the width of the paths and number of seats, not to speak of the bandstands, aviaries, ponds for goldfish, kiosks for light refreshments, tea houses etc. Contrary to the clichéd ideas about the 19th century public parks were not designed merely for “strolling” nor did they consist only of “pictures” either. They offered their visitors activities like boating, bowling, skating, tobogganing, concerts, choir singing, and theatre performances as well as playgrounds for children. Many bandstands and open air stages have subsequently disappeared, and new activities – table-tennis, mini-golf, and open air chess – have superseded the earlier pastimes. The design principles of a historic

park must, nevertheless, be observed, so that the new activities will blend satisfactorily with them.

The parks in the Categories B-G were usually smaller and offered fewer activities. Their design could be more representative or also more restrained and less straightforward than that of the parks where the visitors might come for a whole day's outing.

The problems connected with the originally private grounds, Category H, are very complex and they have been too rarely recognized so far. Such parks usually had a highly individual character, choice plants, as well as relatively narrow paths and few seats. Altering them to serve as municipal parks usually began with a haphazard concept of adding light standards and more benches that, combined with reduced planting details, considered too time consuming to take care of, deprived them of the beautiful and harmonious atmosphere that may have been the very reason for their being acquired by the local authorities in the first place.

3.4. CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE OFFICES OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The public parks are not managed by the parks departments only. The officers of local authorities responsible for electricity and water, security, sports and leisure facilities, maintenance of streets, and organisation of traffic are involved in their maintenance, too. The lack of co-operation between the respective offices is often as striking as it is bad for the parks, and in the end – for the citizens. The transformers, light standards, billboards, not to speak of the traffic lights and traffic signs are usually erected in the “empty” places, i. e. they will divide the spaces in a haphazard way and block the sight lines and the views to and from the parks.

A small historic park may be given completely over to a restaurant. *Cui bono?* A recent report on London parks showed that people came to them for trees and greenery, peace and quiet, fresh air or for taking exercise – and only 19 % of them were interested in restaurant facilities (Muggeridge 2001). Open air cafes with their banners and awnings blazed with advertisements ought to be checked, large scale advertisements on the buildings surrounding the parks too clearly seen through the trees, ditto.

3.5. THE MEDIA TO THE AID

The interest for the gardens and parks is greater than ever among the general public. It is, however, seldom directed towards the public parks, and no wonder. Who wants to see more of the asphalted walks, unkempt lawns, straggly plants, or the empty basins of the fountains? We have to encourage the media to take up the challenges that the historic public parks present. People need to be encouraged to consider their positive aspects, to see them as possible oases of beauty and tranquillity, and to be told about the transformations that they have undergone in connection with the restoration projects. We must, however, tell the media that it is not the flower beds that

need writing up. It is the general complacency about the fate of these parks that needs to be discussed.

The information and education of the local authorities – through lectures, workshops, and study days – is equally vital. The staff of the old parks departments was usually well motivated and interested in their work, but they are fast disappearing, see above. The detrimental consequences of this development and the causes behind it must also be elucidated and publicized by the media.

Some self-criticism is necessary, too. It does not do our cause any good to tell the public about detailed research and painstaking restoration when any amateur gardener can see that the plants used in a given “historical” garden are modern ones. He may not know whether “Baroque” came before or after the Middle Ages, but he can spot the F1 hybrids in a “historic” flowerbed and he will feel deceived. Let us be frank: many renewals and restoration projects do not achieve all their goals. Some 70 % historic accuracy may not even be a bad result – all things considered, but the interested public need be correctly informed.

3.6. AN ICOMOS CHARTER ON PUBLIC PARKS

The Florence Charter of ICOMOS from the year 1981 is well known all over the world, and it has been of great service to the cause of historic gardens. It does not, however, take the preservation of public parks particularly well into account. We need, therefore, a new, separate Charter on the urban parks of the 19th century. These so far undervalued “green” monuments represent an important part of the town planning heritage of the era.

The preservation of historic parks necessitates maintenance processes of their own, because of their ever changing, growing character. They are, indeed, “living” monuments. The Florence Charter states this, but the problems besetting the specific kinds of ongoing conservation processes and continuous checking, that the public parks require, needs to be formulated more precisely and also in greater detail.

Legislation is slow to move, and the people involved in the day-to-day running of public administration cannot be expected to tackle the many and complex issues involved. Harmful statutes and by-laws must ultimately be modified in each individual country, but meanwhile an ICOMOS Charter on public parks is needed to direct and galvanize the efforts of people that trying to save them now.

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