

# Creating Great Urban Parks

by [Fred Kent](#), President, Project for Public Spaces  
and [Kathy Madden](#), Director, Urban Parks Institute

From *Great Parks/Great Cities: Seattle, 1998*, a publication on an Urban Parks Institute regional workshop.

If urban parks can evolve from their current, primarily recreational role, into a new role as a catalyst for community development and enhancement, parks will be an essential component in transforming and enriching our cities. A park and its surrounding area can be not only a place to understand and relate to nature, but it can also be a place for social and cultural exchange. A park can be alive and teeming with entrepreneurial activities such as markets; physical activities such as children playing or people skating, walking or jogging; for cultural activities, such as art and community events; or for simply socializing with friends.



For many years and in many cities throughout the world, parks have played a pivotal role in shaping the success of cities. The first formal "parks," such as Central Park in New York City, were created in the 19th century, to be passive and beautiful, in contrast to the dense and dirty reality of urban life. However, they were, in the long run, a collection of important destinations and places. The Sailboat Pond in Central Park is a good example of such a

"place," and remains both a destination in the park and a place to enjoy nature.

**"We have not even scratched the surface of the impact parks could have on the revitalization of communities."**

Later, parks were planned as part of a broader, inter-connected "open space system," which also included town squares, plazas, greenways and a variety of other types of spaces: just about everything in a city that is not a building or a road. This suggests that the full range of benefits that open space can provide to cities was understood. However, the quality of public spaces and public life in most cities suggests that we do not fully understand this benefit. In fact, we have not even scratched the surface of the impact parks could have on the revitalization of communities.

Many of today's urban parks have few activities outside of recreational opportunities, and do not attract people such as seniors or teens, or people who are just looking for a place to sit or walk on a daily basis. Often, there is not even a sidewalk, a place in the shade, or an opportunity to buy a sandwich or cup of coffee. The danger in all of this is that when there are few reasons for people to go to a park, fewer people use them and they will cease to be valued.

There are several important steps involved in creating parks that are important as community places. One step involves the process we use at Project for Public Spaces to renew parks, which begins with understanding a community's concerns about a particular space. It is then necessary to determine how the assets of the community can be used to develop both the plan and the programming for the park. This will all lead to the development of a community's vision for the park.

Observing how the park is used and measuring people's perceptions of it are also key elements in understanding what changes can be made to transform a park a successful "place." A good park provides a range of things to do - there are a multitude of activities for different age groups and types of people to use. It should be easy to get to, and connected to the surrounding community - accessibility. It should be safe, clean and attractive and there should be places to sit - comfort and image. Most important of all is sociability, the park should be a place to meet other people an integral part of community life. The final and essential part of this process is doing something: making changes in the park, experimenting, and evaluating how the changes effect use.

Today, some cities are beginning to see that parks can contribute significantly to the quality of urban life. By integrating parks into the cultural lives of neighborhoods, and by giving responsibility for maintenance, new programs and in some cases, design, to the communities themselves, we are seeing a renewal of parks in places some may have thought were impossible. What follows are a few examples of parks that have become catalysts for transforming urban areas.

### **Union Square Park, New York City**



New York City's Union Square Park has, at different times in history, been a hub for hotels, theaters, fashion, and as a gathering place where labor unions, communists, anarchists, and socialists frequently met and debated. By the early 1970's the park and the surrounding area had become run-down and the park was perceived as a place for negative activities.

Recently, the park was renovated, using its historic design.



A [business improvment district](#) was developed in the area around the park, and a farmer's market and seasonal Christmas market were established in the parking lot on the north and west ends of the park. The park, the market and the surrounding area have flourished. The market attracts people, provides entrepreneurial opportunities, and gives the community a valuable connection to the farms surrounding the city.

## Laguna Beach, California



A linear park and walkway located between the Pacific Coast Highway and the Pacific Ocean in downtown Laguna Beach, California, has a range of activities for all ages including small-scale sports such as basketball, climbing structures for children, seating and game areas, a boardwalk for strolling, a cafe, and extensive flower beds and landscape displays. The park is considered a major asset to the community.

## San Bernardino, California



Until recently, the heart of San Bernardino, California was a large parking lot in front of City Hall surrounded by streets with fast moving traffic. In an attempt to bring people back to downtown, a central square with a grassy lawn surrounded by a trellis, walkway, seating areas and a bus stop was built.



By adding angled parking on the streets around the park, planting trees and improving crosswalks, traffic was slowed down and the park was made more accessible to the surrounding area.



Unique to the creation of this park was the idea that the plan for the site, and the programming activities would come directly from the community. To accomplish this, the city and the downtown business association put out a call asking non-profit associations interested in using the park to contact them. They received numerous letters and calls of interest. Today a performance tent is located at one end of the square in which weddings, holiday

performances, and fashion shows are held, and there are several different types of markets around the park's perimeter. The park is functioning as a successful central square for the people of San Bernardino.

---