Greater and Greener

Parks Connecting Cities, Cultures and Generations

City Parks Alliance/World Urban Parks Conference in Saint Paul
29th of July-2nd of August 2017

Summary

Many cities in the US are striving to revitalize downtown and create something like Manhattan. In Minneapolis and Saint Paul, where the conference was held, this has been an effort for many years. In this process, parks play a major role. Parks have also been created so as to up-grade disadvantaged areas. Taking advantage of abandoned sites along rivers to create parks have become quite common – "river revolutions". The theme for the conference was social inclusion, and in many ways, it was shown that parks are instrumental in creating good grounds for social interaction. Climate change mitigation and resilience is on the agenda in many US cities as well as in Copenhagen that demonstrated what the city had learnt from the 2011 flooding. It was astounding to hear what some mayors in the US now can say about the need to prioritize walking and biking at the expense of cars. Vancouver, Canada, stands out as a city that has gone a long way to limit sprawl, increase density, promote urban green and build a resilient city, in close dialogue with its citizens. In the International forum on the 2nd of August organized by World Urban Parks the focus was on large urban parks and health. In 1995, Stockholm created a large urban park. Now Toronto, Canada, and Bogota, Colombia present similar initiatives. These and others are examples going in the right direction, but the challenges, with cities possibly doubling in population over the next thirty years, are tremendous. Children can be a great vehicle of change to the better. We need more and better data to see where we are heading.

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A well-organized conference

The conference took place in St Paul, Minnesota, neighbouring city to Minneapolis. Both cities, in a recent number of years, started an effort to vitalize the downtown areas. A number of warehouses and industrial sites have been turned into residential areas with multi-storey apartment houses, some restaurants and theatres. Mississippi river runs through the two cities and is still an important waterway. However, the harbours and docks are used to a lesser extent, and consequently the waterfronts are being developed with residential buildings and parks. A light-rail runs from the airport to downtown St Paul and over to Minneapolis and is about to be extended. However, there is a long way to go to something like a vibrant downtown, like Manhattan. Most of the Twin Cities are a sprawl of single family houses, divided into large segments by freeways cutting through the urban fabric. Greater Minneapolis houses the world's first shopping centre, Southdale. It opened in 1956 and set the course for the further development of the cityscape. In 1992, the world's largest shopping centre, Mall of America, opened not far off from Southdale. Today, herculean efforts are needed to turn the cityscape into something that is sustainable.

The conference gave 1) a very good overview of what is going on in the US cities when it comes to urban green, 2) a thorough presentation of parks in award winning Minneapolis and Saint Paul (the Twin Cities), 3) lots of possibilities for networking and knitting new contacts. In addition to the first four days organized by City Parks Alliance a fifth day was organized as an International Forum by

World Urban Parks. Throughout the conference there were people present not only from around the US but also people from Canada, Colombia, Japan, Sweden, Denmark, Albania – in total 12 different foreign countries. The conference as a whole was very well organized – the conference venue, Riverside Conference in Saint Paul, was spacious and practical, centrally located, a special app could be downloaded with all the information about the program, your own schedule, participants etc. Excursions during the first two days were excellently organized.

City Parks Alliance holds this kind of conference every other year. *World Urban Parks* holds its conference once a year in cooperation with various national park organizations. In two years´ time City Parks Alliance will hold its next conference in Denver, Colorado. Next year´s World Urban Parks conference will be in Melbourne, Australia. The number of participants in the general conference was around one thousand; the International forum collected one hundred.
Check *www.greatergreener.org* for more information.

Social inclusion
The conference focused on equity and inclusion, and some very good arguments, supported by good examples, were given why parks may help create trust among citizens in disadvantaged parts of cities by supplying those areas with recreational facilities, fresh air and meeting places. This is an extremely valuable benefit arousing from well planned and designed parks in an era where societies are "coming apart" (*Charles Murray*) and people are "bowling alone" (*Robert Putnam*). In Toronto parks, big tandoori ovens have been set up for the immigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to cook their food. The south of Minneapolis has a chain of lakes with parks around them, where, from the outset, rich people have settled in large, beautiful homes. But in the northeast, where people with low incomes live, a large urban park, about the size of Central Park in New York, was created in the 1930s by the chief landscape architect of the city at that time, *Theodore Wirth*. Wirth Park provides ample opportunities for jogging, hiking, skiing, biking, bird-watching – integrated within a golf course. In Los Angeles the planned *Los Angeles River Restoration* project is both a nature restoration project, but at the same time a very important program to rehabilitate disadvantaged parts of downtown and other places in the city.

Glenn Harris of *Race Forward* gave the overall picture of large disparities in US cities. The zip code not only tells you about how often streets are being cleaned but also of life expectancy – it may be thirty years difference between two numbers. In 1958, it was still illegal in some states for whites and blacks to marry and today whites are twenty times richer than blacks. So there is still a long way to go and a lot that city planning, housing and PARKS can do to better the situation. *Chris Coleman*, Mayor of Saint Paul, stated that libraries and parks are vital for equity.

Climate change mitigation
There is an awareness, at least in some cities in the US, about climate change and its effects. In Chicago a heat wave that killed 600 people recently and Katrina, the hurricane that flooded New Orleans, is in many people´s minds. Check this interesting mapping of attitudes:
https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/21/climate/how-americans-think-about-climate-change-in-six-maps.html)

It was claimed that storm-water flooding is a problem in all US cities – a long time sewerage operator and manager of Milwaukee confessed he'd completely turned his approach away from building straight pipes and concrete drainage canals to doing away with hard surfaces and creating wetlands. People from New Orleans told about the creation of parks that would absorb up to four feet of water to prevent flooding in the future. *Lykke Leonardsen* told us how Copenhagen was hit by a storm in 2011 that cost the city 8 billion DKK (1.26 billion US) and what that experience has led to. The city has

thoroughly analysed how water runs and is accumulated in various parts of the town and from there started projecting how to handle great amounts of storm water. The main strategy formulated in *Copenhagen Climate Adaption Plan* (adopted in 2015) is to keep water away from buildings, railroads and major roads by way of building new parks and designing new and old parks in such a way as to be able to absorb large quantities of water, designing parks as basins, e.g. Tåsing Square. About 300 projects are going to be carried out around the city in twenty years´ time, solving the problem at one third of the cost of more piping.

In the US there are several different organizations that work with water in cities. One is, *One Water Movement*, the idea to conserve and reuse water as many times over as possible and also to have just one water system, not three – one for drinking, one for sewerage, one for storm-water. In Denver, Colorado, waste-water is being used to water the parks. In large parts of the US, mainly the west Mid-west, there has been a draught for several years. Los Angeles, planning for *Los Angeles River Restoration*, has already created a couple of parks, designed for multipurpose: holding storm water, recreation, biodiversity, biking and walking paths and up-grading disadvantaged parts of the city: *LA Echo Park Lake, Machado Lake, Ken Malloy Park*.

Resilient cities

Resilient cities can mean different things. In many presentations, there was a stress on parks and green areas but social inclusion just as well. Parks in disadvantaged areas were mentioned quite often as a means to up-grade an area, supply recreational facilities and meeting places. Several speakers told about reducing traffic through various means, not only by building walkways and bike-paths, but also by building roundabouts and taking away lanes for cars. In Minneapolis, the first reserved bus lane is being planned and there is an extension of a light-rail system going on. *James Brainard*, Mayor of Carmel outside of Indianapolis, a Republican, sounded like an environment activist in Sweden did in the early 1970s. He worked on a program to reduce car traffic – the average American drives a car two hours per day – and make the city walk able as cities were in the 1740s! It has been possible to reduce the number of lanes leading up to roundabouts, instead of conventional street crossings (because of increased flow), and to use the freed-up area for side-walks and bike-ways. Despite this, of course, car traffic is overwhelming in all American cities. It is a long way to go.
In several presentations, the pure beautification of the city played an important role. It has a lot to do with reusing old rail-yards, harbour-areas, warehouses, waterfronts, dumps and abandoned industrial sites. As a result cities become denser, even without high-rises.

The need for data

Adrian Benepe, *The Trust for Public Land*, stressed the need for data: "In God We Trust – but all others will have to bring data." *Peter Harnik* is said to be a person that should have data on cities and parks. He edits an annual scoreboard of the 110 largest parks in the US. The many good examples given at a conference like this one may give the false impression that things are, in the aggregate, moving in the right direction. We therefore need data on park areas in relation to total area of the city, average distance to parks for people in the city, heat islands, poverty, life expectancy etc. and the developments over time in these respects, in order to be able to plan cost-effectively. Benepe referred to "*Climate-Smart-Cities-Implementation*" for information on what is going on. Cities that were mentioned are Nashville, TN (West Riverfront Park), Birmingham, AL (created a river), Chattanoga, TN, Atlanta (Green infrastructure park), Chicago (bike-paths on old rail-tracks), Los Angeles (creating courts for collecting storm water). The organization *100 Resilient Cities* keeps track of developments.

Vancouver and Miami

Dave Hutch of Vancouver, Canada, gave a convincing tale of how the city grapples with sustainability. It has set definite targets, like 5 minutes´ walk to a park, 150,000 new trees, addition of 25 hectare of green land, per cent increase in physically active etc. in the *"Greenest City Plan"* (2010). The goal is to have 1.1-hectare open space per 1000 inhabitants. The landscape architect James Cornfield was mentioned as the one having designed the master plan for the riverfront. Residential developments are now centred on small flats, since prices have gone up. These apartments don't have their own green yards. Parks become increasingly important for this reason. All of these developments have been discussed in lengthy dialogues with the citizens of Vancouver. (Vancouver is said to have stopped building motorways and set as a goal not to expand the urban area.)

Maria Nardi of Miami-Dade County in Florida claims to have taken a holistic view of resilience. It claims to have the 3rd largest park and public space system in the US. There is an awareness that rising sea-levels will cause problems and the county adopted a plan to mitigate negative consequences already in 2005. Much of it deals with park developments, Debra Guenther told. The plan also includes measures to stimulate people to walk and bike rather than by going by car, such as bike- and walkways. There is a strong social focus. On a question by *Henrik Waldenström*, about how noise in the parks (mainly from traffic, cars, trains, airplanes) is being grappled with, the answer was that it has not been dealt with adequately up to now.

Healthy cities

William Bird, Intelligent Health, gave most convincing arguments for large urban green areas. "The hunters and gatherers that we are, are now living an indoor life." "I have a dream", he said, "a city of parks." His organization has developed a scheme to get people out, moving about. You gather points by swiping your personal card at boxes positioned around the town, in parks and in the nearby countryside. No prizes, just the recognition is enough to get people to go out for walks, biking or jogging. The campaign starts with kids in the schools. They hand out the cards to their parents and pretty soon large segments of the city is involved. William Bird is a contributor to the *Oxford Textbook on Public Health*, soon to be published.

A similar message was conveyed by the *Mayor of Tirana, Albania, Erion Veliaj.* When, after the Communist regime, the city was to be renovated, Veliaj started building playgrounds. Larger parks met with protests but children and their parents defended the plans. "Children are a great vehicle of change!" "Cars want to be alone, but people want to be together." The Mayor seemed to be a man of action – "Don't brainstorm! Try storming instead!"

A lady from Mexico, *Carolyn Aguilar* pleaded for more parks in Mexico City. The city ranks 6th in obesity in the world. There is a tradition of parks and street trees in the city but it has been more or less lost. The first park in that city had been created in 1593. There is an ongoing discussion on how to use the present airport when it is abandoned and a new one created – to some, or possibly a great deal it could be turned into a park. This could reduce the "heath-island effect" in Mexico City.

Planning for large urban parks

Gil Penalosa, Chair of World Urban Parks, opened the *International Forum* on the 2nd of August, with a broad overview of the necessity for creating and maintaining parks in cities, for health, for recreation and for climate change mitigation. "From cars to parks!" Just closing streets to cars and opening up them for bicycles is what is needed to make the miracle happen – suddenly the streets are filled with pedestrians and bikers. However, most Americans live far from parks – 60 per cent live

more than ½ a mile (800 meters) to the nearest park. That may not sound so very far, but what is needed, several speakers stressed, is that there is some form of green, a boulevard, street trees, a patch of green that leads into the park from where people live, in order for people to make the walk into the park.

Landscape considerations don't seem to be that prevalent in city park creation and design. However, the *Landscape Architecture Foundation* has recently published a *"New Landscape Declaration"* (https://lafoundation.org/news-events/2016-summit/new-landscape-declaration/). *The Cultural Landscape Foundation*, another organization, has the largest *data-base on cultural landscapes* in the America (*https://tclf.org/advanced-search*). In some parks in Minnesota recreating the once great prairie, which is now to a great extent lost to cultivation, is now going on. Colleges, such as Carleton and St Olav, do recreate prairie on land that they own. Around Lake Harriot in Minneapolis parklands are going to be "naturalized" to make up 50 rather than 10 percent of the area. Detroit, with its 300 parks, the largest, *Rouge Park*, 1000 acres, is to some extent going to be re-wilded.

Several protected areas close to cities, and now in cities, have been created as a means to hinder further urban sprawl. One example is *Midpenninsula Regional District Opens Space* just south of San Francisco. It was created in the 70s and is financed by a special real estate tax. There will be another area, even larger, set aside as a "special district", east of SF bay, and for the same purpose.

Stockholm, Toronto and Bogota

During the International Forum, organized by World Urban Parks, a couple of interesting examples of recent developments of large urban parks that have a clear landscape connection, were mentioned. *Richard Murray* talked about the creation of a protection for a 27 sqkm (6750 acres) large area in the centre of the *Stockholm* metropolis, which took place in 1995. The area is made up of three major royal parks and hunting grounds that now hang together. At that time it stopped an ongoing exploitation, threatening to encroach on these areas, and has since then continuously had to be defended from various urban development projects. "Creating a large park in a large city, is asking for trouble."

Pam Vienotte, Parks Canada, related decisions taken 2015 in *Toronto, Canada*, to set aside a 70 square km large area to the west of Toronto for Canada´s first *National Urban Park*. Planning had started 30 years ago. Its organization and management is presently about to be completed. It consists of 50 percent farmland that is still going to be cultivated, with a strict ecological profile. The area will give people of neighbouring urban areas great recreational possibilities.

The third example was given by *Maria Claudia Lòpez Sorzano from Bogota*. In that city, a plan for restoring areas adjacent to the city and giving city residents good access to the areas exists. Decisions have recently been taken under the mayor *Enrique Penalosa*. The plan includes mountains slopes that are to have several walk-ways and a lake for recreation. It is a grand scheme encompassing mountains and valleys around and in the city.

River Revolutions

One session at the International Forum was termed *River Revolution Cities*. What goes on along the Mississippi in both *Saint Paul and Minneapolis* are examples of this: cities take the opportunity to create parks and greenways along rivers that run through them. It is often accompanied with developments of both offices and residential buildings along the waterfront – it helps finance the park creation. *Michael Hahm, Saint Paul Parks and Jayne Miller, Minneapolis Parks* told their stories. A lot has been done but there is a lot more to do. Initial public funding has been many times over doubled by private money. They both emphasized that one must not forget stretches of green into neighbouring areas from the waterfront in order for the park to attract people. Other examples that

were presented are *Gothenburg, Sweden*, from which *Helena Bjarnegård and Amelie Sandow* related the city developments around the *Gothia River*, and *Seoul, South Korea*, from which *Kyung-Jin Zoh* told about the creation of a large landscape park around the *Han River*. *Richard Murray* asked about what care river shores and bottoms were given. There was a general agreement that that part of the park – the marine part – mostly had been neglected. People working with *Pittsburgh Parks in Pennsylvania*, said they worked with river bottoms.

Call for more urban green
Other large urban parks that were represented at the conference were *Rouge Park in Detroit* (1000 acres = 4 square km), *Forrest Park in St Louis*, larger than the size of Central Park (i.e. 3 square km), *"Mount Royal" in Montreal*. The company *Atelier Le Balto* (Berlin) was mentioned working on interesting designs for green qualities in cities that connect with outer areas and that are focused on everyday life, not events!

Catherine Nagel, City Parks Alliance, expressed concern over the UN Habitat New Urban Agenda, since it does not contain a strong wording for urban parks and urban green areas. *Tom Dallessio, Next City*, confirmed the impression, having been present at Habitat III in Quito, in October 2016. There is a possibility to influence the further implementation of the UN Habitat agenda in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, February 5-13 2018.

Park management and volunteers
All the U.S. parks – even the very large ones – are managed by single entities, even though the parks are sometimes made up of several cities and a couple of counties. This facilitates management, coherent planning, planning of events, information and advertising, efficient use of personnel etc.
Many parks – not all, e.g. the Minneapolis parks – have suffered cuts in budgets. Volunteers play a very important role in maintaining parks, and even for generating investments and new projects. Central park is cared for by volunteers to 30-40 per cent. All of the City of New York´s parks are cared for by volunteers to 65 percent (seems unbelievable to a European). These volunteer organizations therefore receive quite a bit of money to do their work, and may have salaried employees. They also act as advocates and collect sponsor money. Sometimes a difficult dependency relationship may evolve between the volunteer organization and the formal owner of the park – say a city. Pittsburgh parks have only $20 million in public funds, the rest, making up $65 million, is raised by the volunteers.
A problematic issue that was mentioned is mountain bikes. That sport has increased tremendously and causes very heavy wear and tear. Mountain bikes are forbidden to go in pure nature in many places in the US and in Canada, but the riders are of course difficult to control.

Minneapolis- Saint Paul Parks
The total area of the city of Minneapolis opens spaces (Regional Parks and Neighbourhood Parks) totals 6,700 acres. The regional parks have come about by a Minnesota state legislation in the 1970s, opening up for larger parks with diverse funding from cities and state. The Minneapolis Regional Parks are a series of parks that form a ring around the city. Several lakes are included in the ring, Lake Harriet, Lake Calhoun (soon to be renamed) and others and the brook Minnehaha (Laughing Water) that runs from Lake Harriet to the Mississippi river, forming a beautiful waterfall in the Minnehaha Park. This ring of parks was conceived already in the 1880s by landscape architect *Horace Cleveland* and followed up by *Theodore Wirth* in the early 1900s. To knit them together a parkway was also laid out, giving the people of Minneapolis, who could afford it, to ride around the parks, either in carriages or on horse-back. In the 1920s and 30s the parkway was up-graded to a tarmac street for cars to drive around the city. The parkway is an American invention, following the boulevards of

Haussmann in Paris. They served several purposes besides leisure traffic: stimulating the growth of the city at the periphery, raising the value of real estate and thereby increasing tax receipts for the city, creating ring routes for vehicle traffic (eventually, in many cases, becoming freeways) and preventing fires from spreading in town.

Reflections

Much of what is done today in creating and restoring city parks in the US and Canada – also in other parts of the world – seem to be (I don't have the accounts) quite expensive and will be expensive to keep up. They are built in already built up areas on space left over – rail-way tracks, impediments, shore-lines, vacant lots, parking lots etc. – or as parts of new developments, but then kept minimal. This calls for a lot of artificially created nature. Fancy elements will be falling water and green walls – sculptured nature. These parks will not survive on rain water but have to be irrigated. The wear on the park will be heavy, therefore a lot of stone. At the same time they are designed to accommodate many different kinds of visitors, requiring an assortment of attractions, playgrounds for kids of different ages, park benches and fountains for the seniors, ball-fields (if space admits), sculpture garden, beautiful flower beds that will be beautiful all year round.

The alternative could be larger parcels of land, kept as they are, with what existing natural elements that there is. The Pig's Eye Park, on the Mississippi, a former dump, offers that kind of a park. It needs control of contamination and new top soil but can pretty much be left to itself.

Vancouver, with whales in the bay, spoke a bit about the wonders of nature. However, biodiversity and what is needed to preserve or promote it was not mentioned a lot. No examples of wild-life passages or restoration of habitats were mentioned in the sessions or tours that I took part in. True: this was not the focus for this conference, but it was quite absent overall.

The specific values of large urban parks need to be stated. In a large urban park the possibilities of experiencing "real" nature are, of course, greater. Biodiversity can and will thrive in large urban, well connected green areas. Therefore, in order to up-hold a sense of belonging to nature and understanding nature in the general population, large urban parks are a necessity. There are lots of things you can do in a large urban park that you cannot do in a rich, but fragmented urban green area, such as hiking, skiing, bird-watching, orienteering, biking, nature observation, taking samples and doing research (mustn't do that in a city park!)... Large urban parks will also provide opportunities to create good bike- and walk-ways through town. A large urban park also offers a rendering of the landscape in which the city is set and shows the history of the city. On top of it all you may find places to enjoy silence! Or the sounds of nature – bird song, running water, a fish splash, the wind in the trees.

Although the US landscape and cityscape is fragmented into many constituencies, parks are governed my one single entity. This facilitates matters a great deal. Not least to up-hold rules and practices throughout the park in a uniform way, e.g. alcohol consumption, food and lodging prices, mountain-biking, use of environmental friendly machines, plantation etc. Information is channelled more efficiently in a coherent way.

In order to work with success on greening cities in the future we need to think about what drivers there are for this. The main obstacle and negative force is, of course, businesses with an interest to exploit all available areas, the green ones being the easiest to access. What are the positive drivers: health issues, inequities of life expectancies in different parts of a city, hindering urban sprawl, real estate owners that will enjoy a rise of land values, attracting people and businesses to the city – what more? We have to identify those drivers and work with their agents.

Suggested further reading
Alan Tate, Great City Parks (second edition)
Peter Harnik, Inside City Parks and Annual Scoreboard of the 100 largest cities
Alexander Garvin, Public Parks
Oxford Textbook on Public Health (soon to be published)

Data on parks and cities
Jane Beesley, LA County
Peter Harnik
Gary Korum, Minneapolis Park Board
Cultural Landscape Foundation, data-base