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Book review

Ann Forsyth, Laura R. Musacchio, *Designing Small Parks: A Manual for Addressing Social and Environmental Concerns*, Wiley, New York, ISBN 0-471-73680-5, 2005 (224pp., \$45.00)

Setha Low, Dana Taplin, Suzanne Scheld, *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, ISBN 0-292-71254-5, 2005 (240pp., \$22.95).

Susan Solomon, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*, University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, ISBN 1-58465-517-8, 2005 (276pp., \$29.95).

Designing Small Parks: A Manual for addressing social and environmental concerns

Ann Forsyth is Dayton Hudson Chair of Urban Design and Director of the Metropolitan Design Center at the University of Minnesota. Her publications include *Constructing Suburbs: Competing Voices in a Debate Over Urban Growth* and *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and The Woodlands*.

Laura R. Musacchio is Assistant Professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture and is on the research faculty in the Metropolitan Design Center at the University of Minnesota. She is also a research scientist in urban ecology with the Central Arizona-Phoenix Long-Term Ecological Research project.

Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity

Setha Low is Professor of Environmental Psychology and Anthropology and Director of the Public Space Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is the author of *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*.

Dana Taplin is Codirector of the Public Space Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, as well as Adjunct Professor of Environmental Studies at Pace University and Visiting Assistant Professor of Interior Design at the Pratt Institute.

Suzanne Scheld is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at California State University, Northridge.

American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space

Susan G. Solomon heads her own research firm Curatorial Resources and Research, Princeton, New Jersey. Trained as an art historian with a concentration on 20th-century architecture, Solomon is the author of *Louis I. Kahn's Trenton Jewish Community Center* (2000).

I started this review on the long flight back from participating in a design jury for an international urban design competition in South Korea. The large G5 Cuncheon project involves the development of several hundred acres of new public open spaces including gardens, parks, playgrounds, waterfront areas, and an "ecological park" adjacent to the City's waste treatment plant. I put these three book in my carry-on bag in hopes they could inform my thinking about the design of public open space in a distant place and culture. How could these three different voices help with my role as a design reviewer with a long interest in public space and public life?

Each book offers different but important contributions to the literature on urban open space. Their topics range from how to combine social and ecological approaches in the design of parks to the role of culture in park design to recent advances in playground design. Together they represent new and hopeful ways of looking at public space. Most importantly, they successfully demonstrate that research on people and places has much to offer designers, managers and traveling designer reviewers such as myself.

After a long period of physical and scholarly neglect, urban parks are now receiving the attention they rightly deserve. In the United States, voters are bestowing almost unanimous favor on new park acquisition, restoration and development through bond measures and other tax measures. Developers and city officials for perhaps the first time have discovered that parks and open spaces need to come first before buildings and even roads. Recent city development in London, Barcelona, Chicago, Seattle and Tokyo reflect this trend. Numerous non profit organizations such as the Trust for Public Land, Project for Public Space, City Parks Forum of the American Planning Association, Urban Land Institute have devoted considerable attention to the care and feeding of this movement over the past few decades.

But what do we know about parks and open spaces and the role they play in civic life? What advances have taken place in theory, research and practice? Joining a long list of

books on urban park design and planning, these three different but complementary books offer fresh perspectives and best practices for urban open space design. More importantly, they demonstrate the value of a research approach to design.

Designing Small Parks, by urban designer Ann Forsyth and landscape architect Laura R. Musacchio, is the most practical of the three. It is a primer of basic concepts and design guidelines on how to incorporate social and ecological factors in park design. The authors bring an impressive record of design and research experience from their Metropolitan Design Center at the University of Minnesota (formerly the Design Center for the New American Landscape) to the topic. The book breaks new ground as it addresses the difficult and often neglected realm (the authors call this a “deep division”) of reconciling social and natural factors in the urban environment. This alone makes the book valuable and timely.

Divided into four parts, it is really one book followed by a series of detailed appendices with checklists, key words and design guidelines. The book part presents an overview of key issues drawn from the work of Joan Nassauer, Rachel and Steve Kaplan, Bill Sullivan and Frances Kuo and other important landscape researchers. This is followed by a discussion of twelve topics including park size, appearance, natural elements, safety, management and public participation. Specific guidelines are presented for each topic along with an innovative feature I have not seen before in design books—“Fine Print Facts”, a brief discussion of one specific research study that address topics ranging from day lighting streams, restorative experience to tree location.

Another original contribution of the book are five prototype or “typical” case studies where the authors demonstrate how the guidelines can be applied in different situations. Also useful are the suggested designs that show purely social design solutions, followed by ecological design proposals and finally a more integrated “strategy” that incorporates both approaches to the specific case.

Using numerous illustrations, checklists and bullet points, the authors’ target audience is designers and managers of small urban parks who are too often in a rush to make design decisions without time for more detailed research or literature review. The authors follow the lead of Clare Cooper Marcus and Carolyn Francis’ influential *People Places* book in presenting practical and workable solutions to park design. As such it should occupy a prominent place in the libraries of park officials and landscape architects.

Designing Small Parks is not the definitive work on the topic but fits well into a substantial body of literature that translates research advances into a format accessible and useful for public space practitioners and decision makers. I must admit to often being skeptical of design guideline books as I find books that define key concepts and performance measures to be more helpful. For example,

some of the guidelines in *Designing Small Parks* are either obvious (“provide a variety of sensory experience”) or too general (“work to involve the public in key park decisions”) to be useful. But this does not distract from this importance of the book and its value to park design practice.

While *Designing Small Parks* is concerned with smaller urban parks (“5–6 acres”), *Rethinking Urban Parks* focuses on both larger parks (hundreds or thousands of acres) and larger issues (social and cultural diversity and conflict). Unlike the former book, which largely avoids the more difficult social and cultural issues that often face the design of public space, this book addresses them head-on in an informative and critical way. *Rethinking Urban Parks* is a more theoretical contribution, although like the former, the authors rely heavily on case studies they have conducted of existing parks.

Rethinking Urban Parks is divided into two parts. The first is an overview of the cultural importance of parks followed by a very brief history of urban parks. The second part presents detailed case studies of the five large parks in and around New York City and Philadelphia including recommendations for changes in design and management. The cases are based on ethnographic studies using methods such as observations and interviews, archival research and historical analysis. Included near the end of this book is a chapter on “anthropological methods” that argues for a multiple method approach to studying public space. The distracts however from the text and may have been better included as a methodological appendix.

The authors, Setha Low, Dana Taplin and Suzanne Scheld, current and former faculty and students at CUNY’s Environmental Psychology Program, report on studies they conducted of five parks and beaches in New York City, New Jersey and Philadelphia. They clearly state their intent as working in the tradition of William Whyte’s studies of small urban spaces in the 1970s but enlarging his perspective to include an understanding of cultural and social diversity. They rightly point out that parks are not just places for people but often grounds of conflicts and division that can separate rather than connect communities and people.

The book concludes with a call for more socially diverse and integrative public spaces. While this may be overly romantic and simplistic in a world where migration and immigration are expanding, the authors are correct in calling for more democratic and inclusive urban places. If these fundamental principles and beliefs cannot be designed into and expressed in urban parks both large and small, where else can they?

American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space is a very different kind of book, the most hopeful of the three. While grounded in research, *American Playgrounds* is focused more on design and design innovation. Research is included but is secondary to the author’s purpose to describe some of the best contemporary play environments built in the past two decades. The author Susan Solomon,

an art and architectural historian who now heads her own research firm, provides a refreshing call for more innovation and creativity in the design of children and youth environments. In a period of playground design often dominated by doom and gloom, this is an important and encouraging book. It can be used to inspire designers and their clients to go beyond the current hysteria of liability that limits the design of playgrounds today to largely picking equipment out of catalogs. I plan to use Solomon's book with my own landscape architecture students to get them to think of more inspiring design approaches.

The book is divided into two parts. The first traces the social and design history of playgrounds over the past century. The historical discussion is comprehensive bringing Galen Cranz's 1982 seminal history of park and recreation design *The Politics of Park Design* up to date. I especially enjoyed the attention paid to the contributions of modernism and modern designers such as Aldo van Eyck, Isamu Noguchi, Louis Kahn, Garrett Eckbo, and Dan Kiley to playground design.

The second part presents case studies of thirty-six playground projects organized around discussions of "patrons", "strategies", "variants" and "remedies". Many of these projects are more modest design examples and until now have not been brought together in one place. The text, written for a more popular audience, is engaging and the illustrations are informative. With twenty-nine pages of footnotes and four pages of references, the book is well researched and cites many of the major studies and figures in play research.

What is particularly encouraging about *American Playgrounds* is the work of many young designers who have overcome concerns for safety, low budgets, and often overly restrictive standards to create truly inspiring outdoor places for children. They include landscape architects, architects and artists such as Susan Herrington, Mary Miss, Walter Hood. While the choice of some featured projects seems odd, most are excellent contemporary examples and appear well grounded in child-environment research principles. Solomon states her selection criteria as places that "support community life", "well executed uncluttered design" and include "the latest perspectives on play". But Solomon never tells us how these are met and the book lacks the power that some interviews with users and their quotes would provide. This does not diminish the importance of the book as a wake up call for playground designers and officials to provide more exciting play environments for children.

One limitation with the book is it largely ignores the culture of childhood today. I am convinced from my own design work and research that it is not enough to simply provide better outdoor environments for children. With childhood overly structured and controlled by adults, well-designed places are not always accessible or well used (as I fear is true with some of Solomon's cases). Researchers and designers also need to work hard to educate parents and teachers about the importance of restoring childhood and

the value of naturalistic play. Solomon is correct, however, in focusing her attention largely on institutional settings, as they are the center of childhood today. We need to go beyond formal settings to include the larger local and regional environment as the most critical habitat and landscape of children.

What does this collection of books about urban parks and open spaces have to say about the state of environmental psychology? Most encouraging is their emphasis on translating research findings into design and planning actions. This shows that the gap often discussed between research and design has been successfully bridged, especially in the realm of landscape research. There are methodological shifts as well. All three books show an increasing reliance on the case study method as a primary method in environmental psychology research. This is an encouraging development as case studies are particularly well suited to document designed places and to communicate research results to designers and decision makers. Yet these books demonstrate that the case study method still varies widely and is need of a more uniform and critical approach. I expect that the case study method will replace, if it not has already, post occupancy evaluation as one of the most commonly used methods in environmental design research.

The three books also reflect a more integrated approach to the design of environments combining social, ecological and design considerations. This is a very promising trend, as each area of research has tended to exist separately in both the mind of researchers and designers with little attention on how one can inform the others in designing environments. The books demonstrate the critical need for a more holistic and integrated theory that can guide future research and practice.

Reflecting back on my own recent experience on the design jury in South Korea, I am glad that I brought these books along. What was most helpful was not the precise guidelines or built examples presented in each, but the series of questions they made me think about and ask out loud several times during our jury deliberations. Together they present powerful design and research advances as well as a compelling call for reflection and action.

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