

# Design and Health in Historical Perspective:

American City Parks in the Late 19th Century

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Lincoln Park, Chicago; commons.wikipedia.org

Design and public health have intellectual linkages that stretch at least to the mid-nineteenth century, and involve ideas and people that public health professionals would scarcely recognize as their predecessors. In the United States, a high point in this relationship took place during the wave of rapid urbanization during the late nineteenth century. Over the course of the century, unprecedented urban growth transformed the nation. In 1800, New York City had sixty thousand residents, making it by far the biggest city in the country; by 1880, it boasted 1.2 million. Chicago was the fastest growing

city in the history of the world, growing from four thousand in 1840 to 500,000 in 1880 and 1.7 million in 1900 [1]. With this physical transformation came a host of social transformations brought by industrialization: extreme poverty and extreme wealth, multiethnic populations, and astounding physical chaos. As one historian writes, epidemics of disease, social strife, and the prospect of class conflict proved so threatening to Americans in the late nineteenth century that many viewed the modern city as synonymous with disorder [2].

Civic leaders facing these threats in the late nineteenth century made few distinctions between physical health and moral health. In their eyes, the two went hand-in-hand—the product of dark and congested tenements or dilapidated frame housing. Bad physical spaces created bad social outcomes, whether vice and crime or epidemics of disease. Lawrence Veiller, a prominent New York City housing reformer, described the process. “Environment leaves its ineffaceable records on the souls, minds, and bodies of men,” he told municipal officials in 1911. A child growing up in a dark and congested urban environment “does not grow up to be a normal healthy person, but is anaemic, weak, sickly”—much like a houseplant in similar conditions [3]. Veiller believed, quite literally, that lack of sunlight and fresh air was the main reason Manhattan’s tenement districts had turned into “centres of disease, poverty, vice and crime” [4]. Veiller was not alone in these beliefs. Other observers wrote of the “nervous strain” caused by the artificiality and excessive stimulation of the big city: early sociologists noted high rates of mental illness in urban areas, which they blamed on the constant and unnatural bombardment of sights, sounds, smells, and people [5]. To them, and to civic leaders and reformers, the root of the city’s health and social problems lay in its physical features.

Convinced that cities’ ills derived from their environment, civic leaders and activists turned to careful design to improve this environment. Park construction served as the centerpiece of their program. Beginning in the 1850s, designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted and H.W.S. Cleveland built parks to address the specific social and health problems facing American cities. They eschewed the rigid, geometric plans of formal gardens favored by European designers, instead creating landscapes whose naturalism and informality contrasted with the disorderly, artificial industrial city. Such designs were supposed to present a tamed and bucolic vision of nature, but they were in fact just as artificial as the city itself. In Chicago, for example, landscapers in Lincoln Park in the 1860s faced the ambitious task of turning the site’s flat, dreary prairieland into the lush, undulating landscape that they believed could best address urban problems. They replaced existing vegetation with thousands of foreign and native plants, demolished the lake front sand

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dunes, dug artificial lagoons, built up hills, and even released European house sparrows into the wild [6]. Above all, the landscape was to present a verdant serenity completely unlike the modern cityscape.

Landscape designers intentionally avoided creating “awe-inspiring” beauty, lest it excite visitors in ways at odds with their goal of calming frayed nerves [7].

Advocates focused so intently on design because they considered aesthetics a tool for solving urban health and social hazards. They believed parks to be the “lungs of the city,” a term that suggested both their role in providing fresh air and in purifying urban society from bad influences [8]. They saw the environment of the park as the critical salve for urban spaces that degraded residents’ bodies and minds. For Olmsted, who viewed modern society’s central problem as the decline of opportunities for reflection and repose, park landscapes served as an important mechanism for preserving residents’ mental health and ensuring good behavior [9]. Some took these views of parks’ uplifting power to extreme lengths: one writer in the reform journal *Social Hygiene*, for example, insisted that with a bigger parks budget, he could reduce prostitution in his city by 98 percent [10].

A second aim for park advocates was to strengthen the urban body politic by bringing diverse groups of people together in a common space. To be



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certain, park builders' perspectives were inflected with their class position: though they sought to create spaces for the mingling of different classes, they did not intend for it to take place on equal grounds. Chicago's South Park (today called Washington Park) serves as an illustrative example. There, Olmsted built promenades—wide paths for strolling—to serve as visual focal points for visitors. As moneyed men and women strolled along, Olmsted believed poorer visitors would observe their social betters and, as if by osmosis, adopt their respectable behaviors [11]. Olmsted even tried to prohibit such “disreputable” behaviors as playing ball and walking on the lawns, punishing the latter with a hefty \$20 fine [12]. Such structured inter-class mingling reflected reformers' model for the urban body politic—a society open to most, as long as they played by the rules of those in charge.

Urban park-building campaigns count as one of the most visible legacies of late-nineteenth century public health reform. By 1900, such spaces had become ubiquitous in American cities: Olmsted's firm alone designed major parks in Boston, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Chicago, Detroit, Manhattan, Montreal, and Rochester, among other places [13]. Such parks reveal the breadth of reformers' vision, which made few distinctions between public health and civic health,

or physical ailments and moral ones. At the same time, they reveal its limits. Restrictions against ball playing and working-class leisure proved unrealistic, as many visitors enjoyed parkland without engaging in quiet reflection [14]. Nor could parks solve the crises of industrial capitalism—poverty, social disorder, and disease epidemics—while reformers and civic leaders failed to confront underlying issues in the economic system.

But against other measures, urban parks played an important role in lessening the negative effects of the modern city. They brought fresh air to crowded urban neighborhoods and served as public, democratic spaces open to all. In putting their faith in the uplifting power of the landscape, park builders fashioned essential and beloved social institutions for city residents, respites of sunlight and foliage amid an inhumane city. The enduring popularity of such spaces speaks to the movement's successes.

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