

**Cranz, Galen. *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 1982. Pp. xiii, 347. Maps, illustrations. \$25.00 (U.S.)**

**Robert McDonald**

Volume 12, Number 2, October 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018975ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018975ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

**ISSN**

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

McDonald, R. (1983). Review of [Cranz, Galen. *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 1982. Pp. xiii, 347. Maps, illustrations. \$25.00 (U.S.)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 12(2), 154–155.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1018975ar>

viduals supported health reforms and spear-headed the demand for an extension of services during the Progressive Years. Her insights concerning the motivations, activities, and impact of the reformers is carried through into her discussion of Milwaukee's attempt to lower infant mortality and to combat influenza in 1918.

Leavitt concludes her work by presenting an evaluation of the factors which she believes have determined the success or failure of health reform in general. She summarizes her six categories as "the nature of the issue, medical theory and abilities, economic interests, political pressures, individual actions, and social and cultural diversities" (p. 241). Her conclusions are both convincing and inspiring; convincing because they so clearly put Milwaukee's experience into perspective and inspiring because they suggest a model for Canadian and American urban historians to emulate. All in all, Leavitt's monograph is an excellent first step towards a North American overview of public health reform.

Heather MacDougall  
Innis College  
University of Toronto

---

Cranz, Galen. *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 1982. Pp. xiii, 347. Maps, illustrations. \$25.00 (U.S.).

*The Politics of Park Design* is the first history of "the American park movement in one account, not restricted to one city, one region, or one period" (p. xi). Basing her study on the assumption that urban parks developed in a "remarkably homogeneous" fashion, sociologist Galen Cranz traces the history of city parks in three centres, New York, Chicago and San Francisco. The book first examines the evolution of public parks ideology from 1850 to the present, focussing on the assumptions and ideals of park promoters and administrators. The second half assesses the socio-economic position of park enthusiasts and park recipients, concluding with suggestions for future park development in the United States.

The core of this volume is to be found in Cranz's typology of four ideal types of urban parks, each representing a stage in the park movement's overall development. Public parks first took the form of "pleasure grounds," which dated from 1850 to 1900. Planned according to a coherent body of principles based on the artistic concept of the picturesque, the pleasure ground was meant to draw together families from all social classes. An institution advanced by middle class reformers and aesthetic idealists, the "romantic" pleasure ground, with its curved lines and natural contours, was intended to serve as a counterpoise to the harsh realities of urban life. The "reform park" that followed centred more

narrowly on children and, to a lesser extent, working class men. Built upon the progressive reformers' faith in specialization and expert guidance, the park now became a smaller but more highly structured ground where professional supervisors would organize play. In so doing it would act as a vehicle of social progress. But the moral vision and philosophical consistency of early park designs gave way after 1930 to facilities where recreation services, regardless of type, were to be delivered on demand. The loss of idealism associated with this "public service" approach to park planning led to increasing bureaucratization of park systems and an emphasis on efficient management at the expense of reform. Cranz's final stage of development, the least convincing of her models, is defined as the post-1965 era of the "open-space system." Predicated on an "anything goes" philosophy, parks now took on any shape, size or function, often embracing elements of popular culture that had previously been excluded from parks, even in the recent "recreational facilities" era.

The value of Cranz's sociological approach is to be found in the clarity with which new directions in park planning are isolated and identified. She provides an analytical framework currently missing in the American literature on urban parks. Such precision also serves to obscure the complexity of park history, however. Cranz's model, which emphasizes the typical characteristics of contemporary thinking in each period, overlooks the extent to which traditional attitudes about parks persisted across the sharply-defined temporal boundaries of her typology. Referred to as "layering," this continuity is mentioned but not analyzed. Similarly, by organizing the book so rigorously into chapters according to function (principles, promoters, users, beneficiaries, role of parks), Cranz has isolated from one another her examination of park principles and the sources that nourished them. A narrative format might have integrated cause and effect more fully while sharpening the work's analytical thrust.

Of more concern is the extent to which *The Politics of Park Design* is a comprehensive history of urban parks in the United States. While the sub-title suggests otherwise, it is not. One has to question the extent to which metropolitan trends, evident in large centres like New York, extended throughout the urban system. In addition, one wonders what proportion of new parks created during the 1900-1930 period were "reform parks," and what proportion were merely utilitarian grounds laid out in response to the growing popular demand for athletic fields. Comments about public use of parks notwithstanding, *The Politics of Park Design* is written essentially from the top down, focussing on the ideas of park innovators. But recent literature suggests a different approach to park history. It stresses that, historically, society's lower middle and working classes had their own views of how public space should be used, a perspective not encompassed in the "four distinct constellations" of ideas about city parks discovered by Cranz (p. x). Roy Rosenzweig, in an essay cited in Cranz's bibliography, argues that in the

1980s working class political influence in Worcester, Massachusetts, forced park commissioners to adopt a bipartite park system: playing fields for active recreation in the industrial part of town and scenic parks for passive recreation in the middle class areas.<sup>1</sup> Other work explores the search for escapist pleasures in amusement “parks,” a late nineteenth century trend that undoubtedly influenced twentieth century attitudes towards urban recreational space.<sup>2</sup> Cranz merely alludes to this relationship between popular culture and park design. Yet, as American historian Roy Lubove has noted, it is precisely this “relationship between environment and culture” that is of most concern to social historians studying urban parks.<sup>3</sup> Failure to assess broadly based social and cultural influences on the development of public parks is the book’s principal failing.

If set in this wider context, the historical examination of Canada’s urban parks promises important new insights into the nature of the Canadian urban experience. Despite its flaws, Galen Cranz’s book can provide a useful starting point for this pursuit. Her work offers a number of hypotheses that can be tested for Canada. In addition, a comparative approach will raise obvious questions about the extent to which the British influence in Canada and the Progressive movement in the United States shaped unique park histories in the two North American countries.

Robert McDonald  
Department of History  
University of British Columbia

---

#### NOTES

- 1 Roy Rosenzweig, “Middle-Class Parks and Working Class Play: The Struggle Over Recreational Space in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1870-1910,” *Radical History Review*, vol. 21 (Fall 1979): 31-46. Also see Stephen Hardy, “Parks For The People: Reforming the Boston Park System, 1870-1915,” *Journal of Sport History*, vol. VII, 3A (Winter 1980): 5-24.
- 2 Robert E. Snow and David E. Wright, “Coney Island: A Case Study of Popular Culture and Technical Change,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. IX (Spring 1976): 960-1975, and John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: 1978).
- 3 Roy Lubove, “Social History and The History of Landscape Architecture,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. IX, 1 (Winter, 1975): 269.

---

Schlereth, Thomas J. *Artifacts and the American Past*. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1980. Pp. vii, 294. \$13.95 (U.S.).

*Artifacts and the American Past* was read in considerable anticipation and is reviewed with some regret. The anticipation was based upon the promise of the title and the reputation of its author, Thomas J. Schlereth, as an enthusiast for innovative urban history. His previous calls for a

historic study of the city, represented by “The City as Artifact” in the *AHA Newsletter* (February, 1977), characterized the most creative thrust of a multi-disciplinary, integrated urban historicism. “Artifacts and the American Past” suggest an attempt by a scholar interested in urban history to focus the methodologies and perspectives evolved in that field on smaller objects. Whether a subject is a thimble or a skyscraper and whether the context is a button collection or an urban landscape, the material creations of a civilization represent its technological and intellectual endowments. Despite the sustained, disciplined analysis directed at our cities, relatively little parallel attention has been brought to bear upon our smaller material culture. It was hoped that *Artifacts and the American Past* would channel some of the riches of the one field onto its undernourished neighbour, but regretfully it does not.

The book is divided into three major sections, the first of which deals with graphics as artifacts. Three categories of documentation, photographs, mail-order catalogues and maps, are assessed for their historical potential. In each instance, a good case is made for the use of the specific documentary genre as a source of information, and guidelines are offered to aid converts in their task. While the particular material is American rather than Canadian, the author, in his references and asides, is clearly aware that his statements pertain to this country as to his own. The reader need only substitute “Eaton’s” for “Sears, Roebuck and Co.” and “Goad” for “Sanborn” to give the chapters a familiar ring. Indeed it is the familiar ring that may cause the reader some apprehension. However apt the points the author is making may be, and however well-documented his train of thought, there is little that is new in these chapters. The real achievement is an admirably thorough review of the American literature, rendering the footnotes a useful guide for further reading. The essays themselves, two of which have been published elsewhere, are distantly removed from the archival frontier, though ably done.

In the second section, “Historic Sites as Artifacts,” the author has his greatest opportunity to review the use of small-scale artifacts in historical interpretation. Three types of institutions are considered: historic houses, museum villages and the 1876 Philadelphia International Exhibition. Each has its own chapter, all of which are reprints of previously-published articles. Despite some hints at analytical techniques and references to books actually containing analyses, the treatment of historic houses amounts to a brief review of several strategies for using such institutions in teaching. Schlereth believes admirably that more history can be taught outside the classroom than is currently done, and his approaches are offered in the hope that they will be used, but the ploy of approaching historic houses as teaching devices does not develop the already-established theme of explaining alternate historical sources. Museum villages are also approached as an instructional tool. Included is an apt warning that the image projected may not accord closely to