



Gentry in the new park, c. 1870. By Sipes, William B., d. 1905; Pennsylvania Railroad. Passenger Dept, Public Domain. Retrieved from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=44285778>

Equitable access and enjoyment of green spaces

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Public parks are valuable community assets that have traditionally provided opportunities for social interaction, recreation, and programmed activities, as well as quiet contemplation and relaxation. Planning and designing good quality parks – parks that are diverse, well-distributed, accessible to all walks of life, and contribute to healthy living – are important considerations in planning for the future of cities.

The design of our traditional park spaces, however, has not always focused on inclusivity. Often these spaces were – and continue to be – entrenched in the history of place based on a colonial structure.

These predominantly British concepts emerged during the Victorian era in response to a shift to living in highly urbanized areas and often centred around the idea of parks as refuges from crowded housing conditions.¹ Examples include Frederic Law Olmstead's Victorian planning concepts for New York City's Central Park and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, both envisioned as places where residents could enjoy year-round fresh air and exercise away from crowded tenements and places of industry.²

However, this was a time when men and women of means were considered the primary users of these new parks. Green spaces were designed from the perspective of, and to suit the needs of, typically wealthy white males, a paradigm systemically reinforced through policy, codes, and standards that persist today. This baseline can influence every other user group's experience of these spaces.³

EXPERIENCE OF PLACE SHAPES WHO WE ARE

It is human nature to infer that what we know and what we see around us is all there is and the only way for things to be. Planners, urban designers, and landscape architects play an important role in expanding perspectives, raising awareness, and empowering all user demographics in seeking representation of themselves and their needs in the design of places. They also play a pivotal role in working collaboratively with those who plan, fund, and maintain these spaces to enable a shift from a colonial planning paradigm and break down the barriers to design parks for a modern age and population.

The environments in which we live deeply influence our quality of life and mental and physical well-being.⁴ Access to green space is well established as important to health. Landscape design, and our engagement process in the design, conveys a message about our level of belonging and how welcome we feel in that space individually, as a demographic, and as communities. Proactively inclusive, equitable design should acknowledge and welcome open dialogue on the differences in needs, personal safety, and barriers. In doing so, it can promote not only equitable access, but also equitable enjoyment of a place by addressing differences between gender, culture, social demographics, age, and abilities.

In planning parks and public spaces, emphasis should be placed on engaging vulnerable peoples historically left out of the design process and needs assessments. Women, particularly Indigenous women, women of colour, single mothers, women over 65, and women with disabilities, many of whom have experienced compounding intersectional barriers to representation, should be at the forefront of the dialogue.

For example, consider single mothers in low- to middle-income neighbourhoods, one of the many groups of people who face daily obstacles in how they travel, move, and live in the built environment. To understand the experience of low-income single mothers in the McQuesten neighbourhood in Hamilton, Sky Carville, a co-author of this article, conducted a focus group in 2020 with community members to replicate their daily routes and experiences using interpretive research strategies. This method requires the facilitator to become a social actor and engage in making sense of the experiences the subjects encounter.⁵ It builds a narrative of the real-world user's experience based on valid observations and interviews. In this way, Carville created a representational avatar to analyze and

understand a day in the life of a mother with young children and her experience accessing a local park.

THE "HOW" TO IMPROVE USER EXPERIENCE OF GREEN SPACES

So how do we break out of systemic design thinking? We need to acknowledge that we cannot fully understand the perspectives of others. Our base principle is not to make assumptions on how a space might be used. We believe we need to engage those user groups to gain some insight into how they may want to use those spaces. We propose starting with the question "What counts as a park?" followed by, "Who may use it? And how can we understand how they may use it?" Only then should we consider location, land value, size, program, and amenities to be accommodated.

As designers, it is important to recognize how both the tangible and intangible aspects of our environments can influence behaviours, lifestyle choices, and social interaction and contribute to mental and physical health and well-being. As leaders in the way green spaces are programmed, we must consider alternative approaches, because traditional design methods do not acknowledge the routines and lives of people in the here and now.

We must reinvent the physical and social structure of the built environment to reveal the full importance of lived experiences; it's one of the most important changes we can make. Fully empathetic, life-enhancing environments will not be achieved until communities and decision makers acknowledge and value the aspects of human experience that have been historically undervalued and overlooked. Working together should be our collective responsibility to achieve this objective. While engaging the community during the design process, we must ask "What voices need to be heard?" Meaningful engagement, if done right, will result in a design that reflects the people who will experience these green spaces. ♿

1 Flannery, L. "Design in the Time of Cholera: How Pandemics Reshaped the Built Environment." March 8, 2020. *Planetizen*. Retrieved from: <https://www.planetizen.com/news/2020/05/109286-design-time-cholera-how-pandemics-reshaped-built-environment>.

2 Prospect Park (2008-2021). Prospect Park Alliance. Retrieved from: <http://www.prospectpark.org/visit/history/timeline>.

3 Gardner J. and Begault L. "How Better Urban Planning Can Improve Gender Equality." April 9, 2019. *Behavioural Scientist*. Retrieved from: <https://behavioralscientist.org/how-better-urban-planning-can-improve-gender-equality/>

4 Gardner and Begault (2019).

5 Deming, M. E., & Swaffield, S. (2011). *Landscape architectural research: Inquiry, strategy, design*. John Wiley & Sons.

LeBrasseur, R. "Parks matter more than ever during a time of sickness – something Frederick Law Olmsted understood in the 19th century." May 18, 2020. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/parks-matter-more-than-ever-during-a-time-of-sickness-something-frederick-law-olmsted-understood-in-the-19th-century-137882>.



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