

## RECREATION AND URBAN PARK PLANNING: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

**MIKE MOORE, M.C.P.**

**WOODROW JONES, PH.D.**

*Department of Political Science  
San Diego State University*

### ABSTRACT

Urban Recreational Planning has become an important part of the general planning process. Yet, the urban neighborhood park is facing a crisis of non-use. This paper explores the problems of park planning in the urban environment and asserts the importance of recreational planning in community development.

### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary American society, especially within the context of the city, recreation has become a more significant factor in the development of the community. Recreation is an important element in establishing bonds as well as a feeling of well-being about the community. Unfortunately, increasing technology has provided specialized problems in the urban environment which have resulted in a lessening of community bonds and a general feeling of depersonalization. Technology has also created a change in the work ethic by offering people more leisure time than anyone has ever had before. In fact, "a rapidly changing society has created the need for new kinds of understanding and an appropriate value system which will embrace a changed obsession with work to one of equal concern with leisure." [1]

The role that recreation must play in filling this leisure time is that of developing a sense of meaningful existence by providing a means for the growth of human potentialities. In other words, people must have recreation services which respond to their individual needs by "fostering opportunities for self-

expression and mastery, and social interaction beyond the social groupings of occupational associations and kinship.” [1]

Planning can play an important role in the development of these types of recreation services because it is essential that these services are responsive to the needs of local users and nonusers [2]. Unfortunately planning for recreation and leisure, especially the planning of urban parks and playgrounds, has not been responsive to the needs of the great majority of potential users.

The urban neighborhood park is facing a crisis of nonuse. Much of why neighborhood parks are not used has to do with the planning process itself. This paper attempts to delineate, through the available literature, the major problems of park planning; its consequent effects and finally to assert the significance of recreation as an aspect of community development.

## PLANNING AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The essence of planning since the advent of urban renewal programs in the 1950's has been the attempt to identify a public interest for the purpose of providing equality and accessibility of urban services to all its residents. This was not always the case. Gans notes that in the first half of the twentieth century, planners were concerned only with land use and developmental capabilities. They viewed human needs within the context of physical determinism:

Their [the planners'] certainty about how people ought to live and how the city ought to look resulted in a nearly static plan, a Platonic vision of the city as an orderly and finished work of art . . . the ends underlying the planner's physical approach reflected their Protestant, middle-class view of life [3].

Since the 1950's planners have attempted to fuse the traditional physical aspects of planning with the social concerns into a comprehensive planning function. Altschuler describes the ideal of comprehensive planning as having three important functions:

1. to create a master plan to guide the deliberations of specialist planners;
2. to evaluate the proposals of specialist planners in light of the master plan; and
3. to coordinate planning so as to ensure that proposals reinforce each other to further the public interest [4].

He goes on to say that in order to perform these functions, the comprehensive planner must “understand the overall public interest” and “possess causal knowledge which enables them to gauge the effect of proposed actions on the public interest.” [4]

Just exactly what the public interest is, however, has been exceedingly difficult for planners to ascertain. While comprehensive planning assesses urban

problems on a more systematic level by recognizing the interrelationships between the physical and social environment, its concept of the public interest was essentially built on analysis and research. As Altschuler points out, "If it [the planner's concept of the public interest] seems somewhat devoid of human warmth, it also sounds more authoritative, more precise, more modern." [4]

Banfield's conceptualization of a "unitary conception" of the public interest, where the "whole may be conceived as a single set of ends pertains equally to all members of the public," seems to be the dominant philosophical guidance system for planners in the development of their project goals [5]. The Wheatons also discuss this position: "Planners have always believed that there is some unified public interest or general welfare which was the responsibility of the planning profession." [6]

Some planners, dissatisfied with the comprehensive approach, have attempted to deal with urban problems on a more basic level through recognition of the belief that a common public interest is really a further extension of middle-class values to society as a whole. Janet Reiner et al. state:

In the face of inequality, disparity and conflict, effective plans must express at one and the same time various and to some degree inconsistent conceptions of the public interest . . . . Recognition of conflicting interests, rather than a community interest forces the planners to relate to the range of public activities to the diverse groups of the population [7].

This type of thinking has led to new roles for planners such as Davidoff's "advocate planner" [8], Reiner's et al. concept of client analysis [7], and Friedman's "action planner" [9] as means of dealing with specific groups' interests within the community and integrating them into the planning process. These role models are yet to be universally accepted models of planning, and are considered too radical by many established traditional "land use" planners. Given this conflict, Branch considers a definition of the public interest to be one of the "critical unresolved problems of urban planning analysis." [10]

Urban recreation planning does not differ from urban planning in romantic pursuit of the public interest. Seymour Gold found that most recreational planning is guided by a public interest that is:

. . . a romantic vision . . . primarily concerned with 1.) measuring and accommodating users instead of nonusers; 2.) measures of quantity instead of quality; 3.) seeking political support from users, who are a minority, instead of nonusers, who are the majority [11].

Gold's second point of quantity over quality is important in this discussion of the public interest because of planning's veneration of "open space" as a public good regardless of its size, shape, location, or its use. Donald Simon states:

For decades every municipal public works project that involved new land uses produced its share of new park sites. These were often small parcels that were often found to be useless for private redevelopment or

public purposes because of their size, location or configuration. Whether leftovers from urban renewal or scraps created when highways were thrust across the city's gridiron plan, this excess acreage was mapped as parkland in the belief that any new addition to park holdings was good [12].

Jane Jacobs admonishes planners on this same basic point:

In orthodox city planning, neighborhood open spaces are venerated in an amazingly uncritical fashion, much as savages venerate magical fetishes . . . . Walk with a planner through a dispirited neighborhood and though it be already scabby with deserted parks and tired landscaping festooned with Kleenex, he will envision a future with more open space [13].

The result of this attitude, this conventional definition of the public interest on the part of recreation planners has created a situation where, according to Gold [2], the future of the neighborhood park lies in the balance.

### THE FAILURE OF METHODOLOGY

In the absence of a realistic conception of the public interest from which to develop its basic goals, recreation planning has consequently followed a methodological process that has resulted in nonuse of many local facilities. Part of the methodological problem is that the traditional recreation planner is guided by "commonly accepted rationales . . . which defy logic and reason." [14] These rationales include a "guideline syndrome" where "minimum standards soon become desirable goals and measures of adequacy" [14]; the concept of "uniformity and equality" in that this is the only way for planners to "insure everyone an equal distribution of goods and services" [14]; and, "public acceptance" which usually means only acceptance by the supplier of the service and not the entire community [14].

In assessing recreational need, planners tend to borrow conceptualizations from other fields of planning. David Mercer, in discussing the concept of recreational need, uses Bradshaw's taxonomy of social needs [15]. He too criticizes planners for their easy acceptance of standards based on their limited conception of normative needs:

Far from being norms solidly grounded in well-tested empirical research, they are often nothing more than hunches, beliefs or myths about recreation which through time have been accepted and became institutionalized by groups of "experts." [15]

An example of this type of ambivalent norm is related by David Gray: "The shuffleboard player is a 'participant' according to any definition . . . but the person who eats a sack lunch, reads or converses with a friend is not. The arbitrary distinction between participants and spectators has little meaning." [16]

The inadequacy of the methodology of recreational planning can be illustrated by the nonuser phenomenon experienced in most city parks. Gold delineates

the problem of nonuse into three major causal categories: behavioral, environmental and institutional [17]. Within each are several factors which planners must carefully consider if they are to reverse the trend of nonuse. For example, he states that there are severe "social restraints" which keep people away such as a "lack of familiar and comfortable social context." [18] Brower and Williamson found this was true in the three Baltimore inner-city neighborhoods they surveyed. While parks and playgrounds sat deserted, neighbors and children congregated in front of their homes where friends and family passed by and they could keep an eye on household matters [19].

A second important rationale for nonuse of urban parks is the need for convenient access [17]. Bangs and Mahler found that consistent park patrons would travel no more than 400 feet to make use of a local park [20]. Nanine Clay discussed the problem of access in relation to the situation of miniparks in urban neighborhoods:

Miniparks are misplaced . . . . If older people like to sit and watch the traffic go by, the minipark may be set too deep between buildings for a good view of the street . . . if young men gather at the street corner where the action is, the nearest park may be located in the least visible, duller part of the block [21].

A third significant factor is the difference between users and suppliers of recreational services. Gold discovered that there is a "planning assumption of specialized, permanent types of recreational opportunities that may be obsolete and romantic." [14] Further, Gold asserts that "parks that do not reflect or anticipate the social dynamics of neighborhoods invite nonuse." [17].

In summary, it can be said that the failure of traditional methodology has led to "urban parks which are ugly and nonfunctional; poorly located, designed and managed in respect to human needs." [18] As Simon asserts, a park for many people "is no longer an amenity. It represents a threat to their safety and a liability to the value of their property." [12] The ultimate result are local parks that are not supported by the neighborhood [18].

## PLANNING WITHOUT COMMUNITY

The present conceptualization of urban recreational planning has a traditional view of community. With a complex array of skills, technical knowledge, and information, the recreational planner has the responsibility of defining community; that is, the subject of the plan. In the case of city planning, this problem is easily solved by the political boundaries established by political authorities. Recreational systems are not easily defined by the reality of political boundaries due to the societal wide nature of the impact of recreation. Even assuming that the planner uses his skills effectively, he still has to face the problems of overlapping political boundaries. Further problems can be found in

the motivating and coordinating of divergent interests within the community as to the importance of recreation for community development.

The lack of identification with a defined community can be a barrier for the acquisition of legitimate authority. Many of our recreational problems require the interest and activity of a number of people over a long period of time to sustain the remedies suggested by long-range plans. In comparison, the natural political communities are often used as stereotypes of type of community and participation that are desirable. These idealized communities are not significant when we are examining recreational needs of a community.

The main focus of identification for recreational planners tends to be the catchment area community rather than the activity community [22]. The catchment area approach to the study of community stresses the demography and ecology of an area. Such a community can easily be isolated on a map or geographically displayed as service areas. The great temptation is to assume that people within these service areas actually share common problems, interests, and values toward recreation and leisure.

The failure of the catchment area approach to the study of community lies in the misdirection of the planning effort toward objects and goals without people. Consequently, the outcome of such plans is not an implicit bond which relates personal needs to community needs. Instead, people in the planning process are guided by rules and regulations without the composite values which are necessary for change in environmental conditions. The result of this approach is that only highly visible and symbolic projects are targets for the planning process. Furthermore, recreational planning is not viewed as an instrument for social changes within the community. Without the commitment of the community over time to these problems there is a relatively small impact that can be directly attributed to planning. This kind of commitment requires individual value changes as well as community reinforcement of those value changes. The present response is to change the agent if there is disharmony rather than making long-range value changes. Thus, too often the results of our planning effort are short-range solutions (open space, parks, etc.) to long-range problems.

Another problem with the conceptualization of the community as a catchment area is that the consumers of recreational benefits do not participate in the formulation of alternatives. The consumer's role is limited in the recreational planning process. This is, in part, due to the fragmentation of the planning process, but also this limited role is encouraged by the specialization of the recreation field. Although consumers have a significant role in blocking actions by authorities, they do not have the knowledge to formulate alternative conceptions of recreation or leisure. Simon, on the role of citizen participation, warns:

Planners should not abdicate their responsibility to local residents. Although planning meetings attract many people, the audience is by no means a cross-section of the local population. The park that is built is the

embodiment of only some people's social theories. It fails because it does not consider the real problems of the area [12].

Thus, the reality of the catchment area approach is that people are dependent on what could be considered an arbitrary program designed by professionals with no perceived public mandate or vision of the recreational community.

Some vision of the society as a recreational community is important for planning for a world of depleting resources. Communities which are only catchment areas are merely epi-phenomenons or communities of time [22]. Time is an important dimension for planning as well as for communities in American life. All plans and communities are pursuits over a limited period of time. The planning dilemma is that it is very difficult to estimate:

1. if the phenomenon we are observing is an artifact of the time or a durable reality; and
2. if our response to the phenomenon is appropriate to its duration [22].

All efforts at recreation planning should be seen as a temporary effort directed at temporary communities. Thus, the difficulties of planning without a community that is not bound by time and space creates a great deal of uncertainty about the nature of present plans.

## SUMMARY

The crisis of recreation planning was developed during a period of affluence and now must be resolved during a period of scarcity. Planning is an important part of the resolution of the leisure and recreational problem of the inner city. Long-range goals and specifications require the authority and the management capability of strong government with an environmental philosophy built on the ideas of less instead of more. Unfortunately, recent efforts to assert the natural role of a liberal government to manage the urban environment have fallen short of their intent.

It seems, first of all, that urban planners have not dealt with the role of *recreation in urban life, or the nature and function of urban parks* as a significant issue for discussion in professional literature. With energy resources becoming scarce, many people who now have the opportunity to travel to national forests or other regional recreation facilities will have to find their recreational outlets closer to home; and those who were never able to visit such places need to be provided with functional facilities. This would seem to imply that recreation facilities and services should be considered as part of a package when considering housing projects or transportation systems. At any rate, there seems to be a need for much more discussion in this area. Brower and Williamson, for example, provide several insights as to how housing can be designed or rehabilitated to provide for safer and more congenial home recreation opportunities, and better utilized playgrounds [19].

Another very important aspect that seems to have been overlooked by planners is the role of recreation in community development. Those professionals who are more deeply involved in the field, like Murphy and Howard, have recognized how important recreation can be in fulfilling human needs. Planners need to stop designing for activities such as little league, arts and crafts, and start seeing parks as places of congeniality and multiple contact points for conversation.

Finally, more public involvement is needed to assure equal access to open spaces. Further the concept of open space utilization should be reevaluated over time given public preferences. Planners need to reconsider the concept of open space as has evolved over the years and move toward a system of evaluation. Perhaps once these aspects are more fully researched and analyzed, and a body of theory on recreation planning begins to evolve, planners will ascertain that the problems delineated in this paper are significant and far-reaching in their implications for future urban life.

#### REFERENCES

1. J. F. Murphy and D. R. Howard, *Delivery of Community Leisure Services: An Holistic Approach*, Lea & Febiger, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1977.
2. S. Gold, The Fate of Urban Parks, *Parks & Recreation*, pp. 14-15, 38-40, October 1976.
3. H. J. Gans, City Planning in America: A Sociological Analysis, H. J. Gans (ed.), *People and Plans*, Basic Books, New York, New York, 1968.
4. A. Altschuler, *The City Planning Process*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1965.
5. E. Banfield, The Public Interest, N. Gilbert and H. Specht (eds.), *Planning for Social Welfare*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1977.
6. W. L. C. Wheaton and M. F. Wheaton, Identifying the Public Interest: Values and Goals, E. Erber (ed.), *Urban Planning in Transition*, Grossman Publishers, New York, New York, 1970.
7. J. Reiner, E. Reiner, and T. Reiner, Client Analysis and the Planning of Public Programs, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, pp. 270-271, November 1963.
8. P. Davidoff, Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, pp. 331-337, November 1965.
9. J. Friedman, Notes on Societal Action, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, pp. 311-318, September 1969.
10. M. Branch, Critical Unresolved Problems on Urban Planning Analysis, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, pp. 47-59, January 1978.
11. S. Gold, Neighborhood Parks: The Nonuse Phenomenon, *Evaluation Quarterly*, 1:2, pp. 319-327, 1977.
12. D. Simon, A Prospect for Parks, *The Public Interest*, pp. 27-39, Summer 1976.
13. J. Jacobs, The Uses of Neighborhood Parks, W. N. Seymour, Jr. (ed.), *Small Urban Spaces*, New York University Press, New York, New York, 1969.



14. S. Gold, *Urban Recreation Planning*, Lea & Febiger, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1973.
15. D. Mercer, The Concept of Recreational Need, *Journal of Leisure Research*, 5:1, pp. 37-47, 1973.
16. D. Gray, The Un-Hostile Park, *Parks & Recreation*, pp. 26-28, 59-61, February 1970.
17. S. Gold, Nonuse of Neighborhood Parks, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, pp. 369-378, November 1972.
18. S. Gold, The Titanic Effect on Parks and Recreation, *Parks & Recreation*, pp. 23-26, June 1975.
19. S. Brower and P. Williamson, Outdoor Recreation as a Function of the Urban Housing Environment, *Environment and Behavior*, 6:3, pp. 295-345, 1974.
20. R. Bangs and D. Mahler, Users of Local Parks, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, pp. 247-249, November 1972.
21. N. Clay, Miniparks: Diminishing Returns, *Parks & Recreation*, pp. 23-26, January 1971.
22. A. Panzetta, The Concept of Community: The Short-Circuit of Mental Health Movement, R. M. Kramer and H. Specht (eds.), *Readings in Community Organization Practice*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1975.

Direct reprint requests to:

Woodrow Jones, Ph.D.  
Department of Political Science  
College of Arts and Letters  
San Diego State University  
San Diego, California 92182