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# ‘The Lungs of the City’: Green Space, Public Health and Bodily Metaphor in the Landscape of Urban Park History

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## ABSTRACT

New machinery, factory systems and a burgeoning population made the nineteenth century the era of the city. It also represented the coming of age of the city park. Across Europe and North America, elite spaces were opened to public access and new areas dedicated as ‘parks for the people.’ This paper offers a brief tour of green spaces across three iconic metropolitan sites – London, Paris and New York – to consider how the axioms of recreation, industrial modernity and public health operated in specific urban contexts. Of particular note is the fact that park planners embraced an holistic vision, often articulated via bodily metaphors, that incorporated both social and environmental aspects: thus behind apparently nostalgic visions for a pre-industrial bucolic greenery lay irrefutably modern approaches to urban planning that presaged twenty and twenty-first century holistic experiments in garden cities and ‘living homes.’ Also central to this study is the idea of the park as a liminal space and an eminently readable landscape: an evolving site of translation, negotiation and transformation that highlights the fertile ground of cross-disciplinary study and the benefits of a complex ecological history that involves close examination of place, action and imagery.

## KEYWORDS

Parks, city, public health, gardens, medicine

'Nature', according to Raymond Williams, is perhaps the most complicated word in the English language. 'Park' is surely a close contender for that title. The word conjures up all manner of associations, spanning distant spaces and time periods and encompassing a plethora of diverse spaces. Defined as 'enclosures for beasts of the chase', the first parks were dedicated to sporting pursuits and could be found across the ancient world (King Ashurbanipal's hunting park in Assyria) and medieval Europe (the earliest reference to an English deerhay or park dates to 1045 in Great Ongar, Essex). In the early modern period – and still firmly under the command of the nobility – parks came to include both formally arranged private spaces and more naturalistically designed landscapes. The first was represented by Versailles and its radiated display of power over nature and nation, with hydraulic fountains and transplanted trees, designed by Andre Le Notre from 1661. The English landscape park, of which there were 4,000 iterations by 1783, encapsulated the second. By the twentieth century, the vocabulary of 'park' had been appropriated to describe a range of amusement sites (Coney Island, New York; Blackpool) as well as places dedicated to the protection of habitat and the wild things therein from Abisko National Park to Yellowstone.<sup>1</sup>

Given the focus of this Special Issue, it makes sense at this point to raise the question of where the 'park' ends and the 'garden' begins? With a nod to dictionary definitions, *park* is typically used to describe a large piece of land (often open in aspect and typically dominated by greensward) given over to a public mandate and party to multiple recreational and conservationist uses, whereas *garden* speaks more of an intimacy of planting, a homely/private feel and a singular horticultural function. Such categories, in fact, are usefully problematised when one begins to explore the rich environmental histories belonging to (and shared by) both traditions.<sup>2</sup>

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1. As such, this perspective combines Donald Worster's emphasis on materiality with William Cronon's focus on the 'idea' of nature (see Donald Worster (ed.), *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995)) as well as more recent work in historical geography emphasising patterns and relations between objects, cultures and spaces (see Stephan Harrison, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (eds), *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2004); Rebecca Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)).
  2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Flamingo, 1983), p. 219. For scholarship on designed landscapes and parks over time, see Geoffrey Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995); Karen Jones and John Wills, *The Invention of the Park: Recreational Landscapes from the Garden of Eden to Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); Tom Turner, *Garden History: Philosophy and Design* (Abingdon: Spon Press, 2005); Henry Lawrence, *City Trees: A Historical Geography from the Renaissance through the Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Paul A. Elliott, *British Urban Trees: A Social and Cultural History c.1800-1914* (Winwick, Cambs: The White Horse Press, 2016); E. Carr, S. Eyring and R. Wilson, *Public Nature: Scenery, History, and Park Design* (Charlottesville:

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Finding the essence of ‘the park’ amidst this smorgasbord of greenery presents a challenging prospect. In this paper, I want to point to the value of a case-study approach in highlighting how parks *and* garden history can provide a useful (tree-lined) avenue to understanding the entangled histories of place and people across myriad cultures and geographies. Under scrutiny here is one park variant – the city park (sometimes referred to as a public garden) – tracked across three distinct spaces. In this micro-history of urban emparkment, we can trace a wider genealogy of entertainment, restorative perambulation and resource conservation common to the broader ‘park’ ideal, while pointing to the elements of the city that made a distinct imprint, specifically in its interwoven rationales of wellbeing, populism and planting. As such, the park represents a site of serious urban enquiry, a place ostensibly given over to recreation, but whose bounded confines offer up a social and environmental capsule ripe for excavation. Or, as parks scholar Araceli Masteron-Algar puts it, ‘the park is a text into the city’. Each location has its own park-life, so to speak – a product of the peculiarities of geology, climate, soil and local residents (both human and non-human) – but the collective story of civic park-making illuminates not only the value of a transnational comparative but an integrated history in which the environment and society are considered as necessarily connected.<sup>3</sup>

From genealogy, I turn to physiology and the particular rhetorical and conceptual turns used by horticulturalists, civic officials and urban planners. Here, in the city park, ‘pure’ nature was idealised, power politics paraded and grand schemes of landscape engineering laid out. A decisive attempt to counter the debilitating influences of municipal development by bringing the country to the city, parks and public gardens transplanted the vigour and gravitas of arboreal plantings to urban streets ailing under the relentless architecture (built and psychological) of an ever-expanding metropolitan environment. Tracking this story across parallel historiographies, garden historians have explored the careers of famous designers and their planting plans, while historians of medicine and public health have scrutinised a modern political and social infrastructure of sanitation and reform. Although a broadening scholarship on illness has delved into the environmental situ of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ including asylums and hospitals, more formally designated green space has been typically left out of the medical picture (despite the fact that the historical record resounds with comments on the sinuous contours connecting medical discourse, green space and sanitary reform). Hence, by grounding schemes for

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University of Virginia Press, 2013); A. Howkins, J. Orsi and M. Fiege, *National Parks Beyond the Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016); B. Gissibl, S. Hohler and P. Kupper (eds), *Civilizing Nature: The National Park in Global Perspective* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010); Jane Brown, *The Pursuit of Paradise: A Social History of Gardens and Gardening* (London: HarperCollins, 1999); John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

3. Araceli Masteron-Algar, *Ecuadorians in Madrid: Migrants’ Place in Urban History* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), p. 83.

park-making in ideas of health and bodily function – specifically the idea of nature as both tonic and essential organ – this paper points to the value of an integrated history of connected spaces (in other words, an environmental history predicated on sites of work and play) that positively interleaves the histories of iconic green places and metropolitan spaces.<sup>4</sup>

Many will immediately recognise the popular metaphor of parks as ‘lungs of the city’, but dig a little deeper into the historical landscape of urban planning and we discover a complex and ecologically framed narrative in which various constituencies over time situated the park within a medicalised skeleton, offering pronouncements (metaphorical and literal) on public health, civic display and welfare reform and carefully situating the story of green space within a wider rubric of social wellbeing and urban physiology. In *Patterned Ground* (2004), Harrison, Pile and Thrift divide their studies of nature-cultural space into partitions of flow, site and matter. Approaching the city as a body sits snugly in this methodological furrow, incorporating what Rebecca Jane Bennett calls a ‘vital materiality’ between living things, human and non-human.

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4. Scholarship on medicine and public health includes Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (London: Routledge, 1999); C. Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); G. Rosen, *A History of Public Health* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); R. Lewis, *Edwin Chadwick and the Public Health Movement* (London: Longman’s and Green, 1952); John Duffy, *A History of Public Health in New York City, 1625–1865* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1968) and *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health* (Chicago: Illinois University Press, 1990). For examples of urban parks and garden history, see: Hazel Conway, *People’s Parks: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and *Public Parks* (Princes Risborough, Bucks: Shire Publications, 1996); Elliott, *British Urban Trees*, pp. 57–100; Harriet Jordan, ‘Public Parks, 1885–1914’, *Garden History* 22 (1) (1994): 85; Hilary Taylor, ‘Urban Public Parks, 1840–1900: Design and Meaning’, *Garden History* 23 (2) (1995): 201–221; G.F. Chadwick, *The Park and the Town* (London: Architectural Press, 1966); C.E Beveridge and P. Rocheleau, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1998); R. Rosenzweig and E. Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1992); Mark Luccarelli, *The Eclipse of Urbanism and The Greening of Public Space: Image-Making and the Search for a Commons in the United States, 1682–1865* (Winwick, Cambs: The White Horse Press, 2016), pp. 175–216; Alan Tate, *Great City Parks* (London: Routledge, 2015). For important directions in the social-environmental exploration of therapeutic landscapes, see Carla Yanni, *The Architecture of Madness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Kenneth Hawkins, ‘The Therapeutic Landscape: Nature, Architecture and Mind in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Rochester, 1991); Bonj Szczygiel and Robert Hewitt, ‘Nineteenth-century Medical Landscapes: John H Rauch, Frederick Law Olmsted and the Search for Salubrity’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 74 (4) (2000), 708–734; Clare Hickman, *Therapeutic Landscapes: A History of English Hospital Gardens Since 1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) and “‘To Brighten the Aspect of Our City Streets and increase the health and enjoyment of our city’: The National Health Society and urban green space in late 19<sup>th</sup> century London”, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 118 (2013): 112–9; Mick Carpenter, ‘From “healthful exercise” to “nature on prescription”: The politics of urban green spaces and walking for health’, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 118 (2013): 120–7; Elliott, *British Urban Trees*, pp. 297–340.

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Particularly relevant here as the fact that parks were characterised as essential organic components in a democratic metropolis, vital biotic elements in a functional and figurative ‘living system’. Such discourses inferred that the city was seen as an organism, its welfare contingent on the healthy circulation of human and non-human actors and the successful prosecution of vital bodily functions.

Civil engineer and historian of technology, Sabine Barles provides useful instruction here in her work on urban metabolism, energy flows and the complex relations involving society, energy and organic materials. Interestingly, the eco-cultural dynamics of biological metaphor have been explored in numerous other contexts (social bodies, the body politic, even the biological metaphors embedded in the British railway network), but have not been convincingly examined in relation to the history of modern parks and public gardens. Communicated through landscape design, political discourse and cultural life, such ideas help explain how ‘the park’ was transformed from private enclave for the aristocracy to a ubiquitous (and networked) part of our contemporary urban ecology. As the editors of landscape magazine *Topos* note, ‘A city without parks is not a city, at least not a modern one’.<sup>5</sup>

## THE CULTURAL ECOLOGY OF THE PARK AND THE IDEA OF NATURE AS A TONIC

The idea of nature as a tonic for urban society has a distinguished lineage. Classical theorists on city space and urban design ventured firm connections between green space and the health of citizens. ‘Walking in the open air is very healthy, particularly for the eyes, since the refined and rarefied air that comes from green things, finding its way in because of physical exercise ... leaves the sight keen and the image distinct’ as well as ‘sucking the humours

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5. Harrison, Pile and Thrift, *Patterned Ground*, p. 5; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 112–13; *Topos* (ed.), *Parks: Green Spaces in European Cities* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2002), p. 5. For historical studies on the body, see: Pamela Gilbert, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996); B. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (London: Blackwell's, 1984); J. Robb and O. Harris, *The Body in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); L. Kalof and W. Bynum (eds), *A Cultural History of the Human Body* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991); Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Richard Sennett's *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), Sarah Schrank and Didem Ekici, *Healing Spaces: Modern Architecture and the Body* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); S. Sheard and H. Power (eds), *Body and History: Histories of Urban Public Health* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) and Sabine Barles' ‘The Urban Metabolism of Paris and its Region’, *Journal of Industrial Ecology* **13** (6) (2009): 898–913 usefully informed the parameters of this paper in their application of bodily metaphor to urban contexts and interdisciplinary approach combining historical geography, urban planning and medical and cultural history.



from the frame' was how Vitruvius put it (he also advocated that city architects be trained in medicine). In Renaissance Europe, the botanic garden – or physic garden – suggested a formative link between the cultivation of plants, their learned study and medicinal application. In Paris, the Jardin des Plantes was planted with a herb garden nine years after its founding (1635), opened to the public in 1640, and accessorised with a maze and labyrinth by the Comte De Buffon in 1739, itself a nod to the importance of entertainment and performance in the historic function of park space. Also worth noting in this developing discourse were Enlightenment ideas about anatomy and the human body, specifically those relating to blood circulation, respiration, cleanliness and environmental contamination. Here nature provided an expansive metaphorical landscape of reference aside from its provenance as a place of wellbeing and equilibrium. One need only look to the anatomical drawings and descriptions of body function to see the way in which understandings of human physiology and healthfulness were informed by (and informed) natural descriptives – the bronchial 'tree' as drawn by Da Vinci and Vesalius being a case in point. Drawing on William Harvey's pioneering work on systemic circulation, John Case's *Compendium Anatomicum nova methodo institutum* (1695) contained an image of *Homo sapiens* as a living tree with roots and branches growing forth from the epidermis: a stark illustration of the synchronous landscape of anthropoid and botanical bodily health.<sup>6</sup>

In the early modern period, those green spaces that were open to a (selective) public consistently invoked a vernacular of health within a complicated cultural ecology layered with patronage and embedded social capital. Henry IV established the Place Royale (now Vosges) in 1605 out of concern that the people of Paris needed 'a place to promenade' as they were 'closely pressed together in their houses'. The city of London, too, featured a plethora of royal parks including Greenwich (1433), St James' (1532), Hyde (1536) and Richmond (1637) that made the transition from royal hunting reserves into spaces for social and environmental respite in various shapes and sizes, each motivated largely by concerns about ever-encroaching urban space in the western hinterlands of the city. From grazing pasture to riding parade, landscape garden to gaming venue, London's parklands offered a wide range of functions providing social and physical rejuvenation, organically shifting purpose to suit period imaginings and affectations for particular landscape designs. London's St James' betrayed a colourful (and indubitably medical) history, first incorporated as a hospital for female patients stricken with leprosy and later claimed by Henry VIII as a country retreat complete with walled deer park, bowling green, bathing hole, garden and tennis court. A little over a century later – during which time it had been encircled by sprawling London – Charles II threw open the gates as a 'public park' and before long the capital's fashionable set

6. Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Morris Hicky Morgan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 5.9.5

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gathered there every afternoon to wander along Pall Mall and Birdcage Walk (both names which betrayed leisure pursuits of gaming and aviary display). The axioms of healthy/unhealthy space, enclosure, refuge and resort played through its story. So did an evolving sense of horticultural aesthetic, dictated first by Charles II's desire for a canal and avenues designed after the French formal style, but also tempered by Andre Le Notre, who reigned in his geometric inclinations to reflect the site's 'natural simplicity' and 'rural and in some places wild character' which conferred a certain informal grandeur befitting of *rus in urbe*. As Edward Walford put it: 'St. James's Park retains its verdant and rural character, and in it there are spots where the visitor may sit or walk with every trace of the great city around him shut out from his gaze.' Visitors frequently communicated a language of healthful metaphors – of 'taking the air', promenading as good for the constitution and the benefits of spending time in places of green resort. According to the *New Critical Review* (1736), it was 'exceeding pleasant' and 'a favourite resort of the contemplative'. Samuel Pepys, who regularly referred to the park and those who frequented it, noted in his diary for Sunday 15 July 1666 that, following a large dinner he 'walked to the Parke [where] it being mightily hot and I weary, lay down on the grass by the canaille and slept a while'.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of green space as restorative borrowed much from the worlds of ethics, literature and philosophy as well as that of medical science. A sense of rustic simplicity and proximity to nature – key aspects in the veneration of the pastoral – found fertile ground in the city park ideal, which effectively transplanted broader cultural imaginings and imprinted them on specific sites, with a little help from physical prompts in the form of expansive lawned vistas, towering dendrons and whimsical ephemera. Satirist George Cruikshank's sketch 'St James Park in the Olden Times' (which appeared in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* of 1838) evocatively conveyed this sense of bucolic meandering (for plantings and people) as part of the trappings of the city park, while Cezar De Saussure talked of the eighteenth-century fancy for walking in a setting where 'deer and roe-deer are so tame that they eat out of your hand'. Amidst the tree-lined walkways, thirsty travellers queued for milk from a maid who tended a tethered cow, described by one amused visitor in 1765 as 'served with all the cleanliness peculiar to the English, in little mugs at a penny a mug'. A clear signal of the relationship of city park to countryside (not to mention a micro-tour of garden style), St James' by the late eighteenth-century had embraced the cult of the rustic most associated with the English Landscape tradition, pairing pastoral charm with the odd foray into a horticultural architecture that appeared

7. Dominique Jarrassé, *Grammaire des Jardins Parisiens: De l'héritage des rois aux créations contemporaines* (Paris: Parigramme, 2007), p. 56; le Notre quoted in Paul Rabbitts, *London's Royal Parks* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2014), p. 9; Edward Walford, 'Westminster: St. James's Park', in *Old and New London: Volume 4* (London, 1878), pp. 47–60; Samuel Pepys diary available online at <http://www.pepysdiary.com>



more chaotic – a keen example of a vein of ‘wilderness thinking’ long embedded in park design argot but usually wrenched from European Romantic roots and situated exclusively in New World soil. Here, designer William Kent (lionised by Walpole for his ability to leap the fence and see ‘all nature as a garden’) built a hermitage called Merlin’s Cave, complete with ornamental hermit in situ, in 1730 to indulge Queen Caroline’s penchant for romantic escape. The *Gentleman’s Magazine* labelled it ‘a heap of stones, thrown into a very artful disorder, and curiously embellished with moss and shrubs, to represent rude nature’.<sup>8</sup>

Despite ideals of arboreal uplift and curative access to nature unsullied, the vocabulary of health and ‘natural’ conditions in the eighteenth century allowed room for a great deal of artistic license. For one thing, ‘natural air’ did not mean an absence of choreography or control. At Versailles, Louis XIV allowed the public into his grand masterpiece of parterres and water features on certain days, enlisting nature as an animate actor in his hydraulic spectacle of royal pageantry, while Phillipe D’Orleans, the Duke of Chartres, had visitors to his Parc Monceau (1778), a garden founded on the informal lines of the English landscape park in Paris, follow a certain route around the space to best inspect its ruins, follies, sculptures and grottoes. Visitors wore exotic clothes to pretend they had voyaged to distant places, an illusion serviced by the horticultural spread on display. Moreover, even when ‘public’ gates were opened, democratic access proved elusive. Louis XIV barred uniformed soldiers, servants and beggars from Versailles while many urban parks allowed entry to those who held keys, abided by a dress code or paid a fee. Surrounded by a high wall, Richmond Park was only fully opened (and made practically accessible) to all comers in 1904. Perhaps it was an inevitable conceit, but the park could never truly ‘leap the fence’ from city to countryside. As an intrinsic part of the city body, the park was always a hybrid space – sometimes providing healthy resort and, at other times, drawing to its shady arbours the trappings of urban subculture. As indicated by period press and cartoons, London green provided for a conspicuous parade of high society gossip by day – a colourful example of which is reserved in James Gillray’s ‘Monstrosities of 1799, Kensington Gardens’ – and a veritable melee of jostling bodies. De Saussure complained of the crowds in St James’ and especially the unwelcome brushes against neighbouring promenaders while in *Don Juan* Byron lampooned ‘those vegetable puncheons Call’d ‘Parks’, where there is neither fruit nor flower Enough to gratify a bee’s slight munchings’. After dark, meanwhile, the park seemed a pariah landscape, a place of prostitutes, conspirators and pickpockets,

8. César De Saussure, *A Foreign View of England in the Reigns of George I & George II* (London: Forgotten Books, 2013 [1902]), pp. 48–9; Pierre John Grosley, *A Tour to London, or New Observations on England and its Inhabitants* (London: Thomas Nugent, 1772), p. 81; ‘Merlin’s Prophecy, and an Interpretation’, *The Craftsman* No. 491, 13 Sept. 1733; Sylvanus Urban (ed.), *Gentleman’s Magazine or Monthly Intelligencer*, Vol. 5, 1735 (London, Edward Cave, 1735), pp. 532–535.

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as illuminated by the Earl of Rochester's 'A Ramble Through St James' Park' (c.1680) in which the poet discovered not a refuge to 'cool my head and fire my heart' but an 'all-sin sheltering grove' frequented by 'Whores of the bulk, and the alcove, / Great ladies, chambermaids, and drudges, / The rag-picker, and heiress trudges: / Car-men, divines, Great Lords, and tailors, / Prentices, pimps, poets, and gaolers.' Locked at nightfall, the park was regarded as dangerous territory by the 1760s, the stagnant waters of Rosamund's Pond and its 'noxious' emanations (especially unpleasant to residents of nearby Downing Street) signalling to many that the urban park ideal had fallen into decay.<sup>9</sup>

## PUBLIC HEALTH, THE CITY BODY AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CITY PARK

In 1825, London's population hit 1,350,000. New York boasted 4,250,000 residents by 1900. Paris counted 2.7 million citizens. The nineteenth-century cityscape bespoke optimism, prosperity, energy and modernity. Some saw what we would regard now as a contaminated location in beautiful, aesthetic and intrinsically vigorous terms: itself a keen example of the changing iconography of healthy space. Encapsulated in a famous canvas painted by William Wyld, 'Manchester from Kersal Moor, 1857' intoned that city and nature could be harmonious neighbours, with rolling hills and billowing smoke juxtaposed as synchronous landscapes, each presented as equivalently attractive. Over time, however, the belching chimneys of industry grew to represent alienation and unhealthy living, an image evocatively conveyed by poet John Ruskin's 'devil's darkness' and 'dense manufacturing mist' or captured visually in *Punch* magazine's gloomy take on the ship canal bringing holidaymakers to the city, 'Sur-Mer in Manchester: A Sea-Ductive Prospect' (1882). Such a shift was pertinent – as the age of industrialism preceded apace, the landscape of the city grappled with the factory system and its many social and economic consequences. It was in this context that the urban park idea found fertile ground with civic authorities who were busily developing a raft of public health measures, particularly in relation to vectors of population growth, hygiene, mortality and communicative disease. Accordingly, alongside a reconstituted civic architecture of public works the park landscape was replanted as a metaphorical saviour of the urban landscape and its citizens. Open spaces and greenery became all-purpose medicines to cure a range of human maladies, while a language of 'green health' infused various reformist drives from sanitation and

9. De Saussure, *A Foreign View of England*, pp. 48–9; Lord George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan in Sixteen Cantos* (Halifax: Milner & Sowerby, 1837), LXVI; John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *Poems on Several Occasions: By the Right Honourable, The E. of R--* (Antwerpen: n.p., c.1680), pp. 14–19. On subversive and socially prohibited behaviour in London's parks, see Elliott, *British Urban Trees*, pp. 84–8.

sanitaria, slum clearance to cemeteries. Edwin Chadwick, a leading British reformer for public health, illustrated such thinking in his positive reflections on the social benefits of Derby Arboretum (1840) in a section of his landmark text *Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842), entitled ‘Effects of Public Walks and Gardens on the Health and Morals of the Lower Classes of the Population’, as well as reprinting designer J.C. Loudon’s report in full as an appendix. As such, the worlds of medical and environmental improvement found common ground in settling on the park as a site of urban healing.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing part of this emerging discourse concerned the idea of the city as body, a biological ‘whole’ in which constituent parts were connected necessarily and intrinsically. As Richard Sennett explores in *Flesh and Stone*, William Harvey’s findings as to the function of blood circulation as a signal of overall wellbeing were transplanted in spatial terms to city streets – the ideas of ‘flowing arteries and veins’ a useful template for the design of the expanding modern city. This biotic schematic made sense – the idea of a city body suggested the existence of a system, a network of symbiosis, a unity of purpose, as well as a sense of energy and organic quality. It was, most significantly, in the age of industrialism that such precepts gained a complete airing, motivated by a confluence of factors that saw wide attention to ‘bodies’ from the worlds of professionalised medicine, the modern state and its ideologies of civic nationalism and (most significantly) a focus on social disease and a landscape of sanitary reform.<sup>11</sup>

Pamela Gilbert points out that the language of urban planning from the mid-century resonated with the idea of the city as an ‘organism with its own rhythms and cycles’ while Richard Dennis presents the idea of networked space as a fundamental aspect of what make the modern city ‘modern.’ Developing ideas of hygiene, flow and an emphasis on mobility and healthy ventilation, the metaphor of a municipal physiology seemed ideally suited for the vernacular of nineteenth-century reform *and* for the mobilisation of the park as a device of public health uplift. Accordingly, the more abstracted ideas of healthy space and fresh air long embedded in the park idea were given a professional scientific standing and imbued with a sense of pathological urgency. Scottish physician James Cantlie in a lecture on degeneration (1885) spoke at length of the needs of fresh air for London and of the smokestacks that ‘vomit forth their impurities’ while French social reformer Victor Considerant asserted in 1845: ‘Paris is an immense workshop of putrefaction, where misery, pestilence and sickness work in concert, where sunlight and air rarely penetrate.

10. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 34 (London: George Allen, 1908), p. 37; ‘Manchester Sur-Mer: A Sea-Ductive Prospect’, *Punch* LXXXII, 7 Oct. 1882; Edwin Chadwick, Report on the *Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965 [1842]).

11. Sennett, *Flesh and Stone*, pp. 255–270.

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Paris is a terrible place where plants shrivel and perish, and where, of seven small infants, four die during the course of the year.’ Such pronouncements suggested an evolving (and more complex) understanding of eco-social context and a link, albeit tentative, between the health of the physical or biotic environment and the wellbeing of an urban citizenry that incorporated both literary-romantic ideas of nature and a developing (and heavily scientific) philosophy of professional medicine.<sup>12</sup>

Foremost in debates about the corporeal city was the idea of the park as a respiratory system. Attributed to William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, and first referenced in parliamentary debate in 1808 about urban encroachment on Hyde Park, the phrase ‘lungs of London’ (later generalised as lungs of the city), situated the park as a healthy space, marked by open ground, verdant greenery and fresh air. Aggrieved at a proposed plan to build eight houses on the park perimeter, MP Lord Windham noted Chatham’s adage before railing at the threat made to the ‘power of vegetation’ and the spoiling of a vital urban landscape offering ‘health and recreation’ and ‘fresh air’. Besieged by urban sprawl and pollution – in contemporary language ‘bad’ or fetid air – the park provided a spatial prescriptive, a central organ that facilitated the breathing of a prosperous metropolis in macro terms by circulating and ventilating the city and in micro terms by providing space for citizens to walk and breathe in healthy surroundings. Henry Crabb Robinson, in his diary for 15 February 1818, paid heed to the role of greenery in making the city liveable, its value as an organic slice of social capital (‘an ornament to the capital’) and a vital bodily organ (‘a healthful appendage’) while the anonymous author of *London Characters and the Humourous Side of London Life* (1871) issued forth a patriotic ode: ‘Oh, wise and prudent John Bull, to enoble thy metropolis with such spacious country walks, and to sweeten it so much with country air! Truly these lungs of London are vital to such a Babylon, and there is no beauty to be compared to them in any city I have ever seen.’ Such comments incorporated a sense of urban space under siege, a developing scientific context and an established metaphorical codex that championed the natural/rural as hearty antidote. As an ailing body, the capital needed to take care of itself. *The Friend* saw the ‘lungs of London’ as ‘essential to the healthful respiration of its inhabitants’, while M. Linton, writing in *The Western Journal of Medicine and Surgery* (1841), explained that the location of St Georges Hospital in the vicinity of St James’ fruitfully ‘borrowed’ the landscape of the park and benefited from its finely ‘fanned’ air so as to be ‘more salubrious than the other hospitals of the city’. Where Renaissance artist-anatomists had looked to the natural world to present

12. Gilbert, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body*, p. 6; Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 2; James Cantlie, *Degeneration Amongst Londoners* (London: Field and Tuer, 1885), p. 7; Victor Considerant quoted in Patrice De Moncan, *Le Paris D’Hausmann* (Paris: Les Éditions du Mécène, 2012), p. 10.

their 'view' of healthy states and the inner body, now reformers and park planners turned the inside out: using the evocative language of bodily metaphor to explain their schemes for social and environmental improvement.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of the park as a critical respiratory organ within a city 'body' eagerly transplanted to other metropolises, the metaphorical landscape of anatomical malady, function and prescription vaulting national borders and site specific aspects to become part of a transnational lexicon of urban biology. In Paris, a language of environmental and social malaise was marked by anatomical reference, as though the city was viewed as a natural system with a metabolism in need of rehabilitation and repair. Napoleon III pointed out that 'Paris is the heart of France. Let us apply our efforts to embellishing this great city. Let us open new streets, make the working class quarters, which lack air and light, more healthy, and let the beneficial sunlight reach everywhere within our walls.' Adolphe Alphand, his landscape architect, also talked effusively about public gardens and wide streets where 'air can circulate freely', essential he felt, for the 'cause of sanitary conditions'. Further afield, the *New York Mirror* on 23 July 1842 adopted the 'happy metaphor' of park respiration to celebrate the importance of urban plants and trees in providing foliage to 'purify and regenerate the atmosphere, in the same way as the lungs give it to blood, changing its venous blue to an arterial scarlet'. London, with its 'overgrown body', was clearly in need of a network of green spaces, the paper concluded. Judgements on the inevitable growth of New York City and the need for a sustainability through parks also prompted a medicalised language from the *New York Daily Times* who predicted in a 4 June 1853 position piece that, 'a million people will soon be crowded on this island, and if these lungs of the city are not furnished, instead of the healthiest, this will become a sickly place'. As an all-purpose medicine for staving off inertia, alienation and social discord, the park amounted to a vital prescription for the city body and its disaffected urban population – a horticultural palliative that allowed urban citizens to ease their physical and psychological debilitation by entry into a restorative world of greenery, gentle exercise and 'country air'.<sup>14</sup>

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13. Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates During the Second Session of the Fourth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, vol. XI (1808), pp. 1124–5; Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscence and Correspondence vol. 2* (London: Macmillan, 1869), p. 87; Anonymous, 'Afternoons in the Park', *London Characters and the Humorous Side of London Life* (London: Stanley Rivers & Co, 1871), pp. 254–276; 'The Lungs of London', *The Friend: A Religious and Literary Journal* 29 (14) (15 Dec. 1855): 109; M. Linton, *The Western Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 3 (1) (Jan. 1841): 65.
  14. Napoleon III quoted in Michael Carmona, *Haussmann* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), p. 16; Adolphe Alphand, *Les Promenades de Paris* (Paris: J. Rothschild, 1867–1873), p. 59; *New York Mirror*, 23 July 1842; *New York Daily Times*, 4 June 1853.

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## CREATING NEW PARKS FOR THE PEOPLE: MAKING A LIVING CITY

The formation of city parks in the nineteenth century entailed two basic practices, firstly, the appropriation of old royal parks for public use (Regent's Park was redesigned by John Nash between 1811 and 1826, the green enclave firmly embedded in an urban planning model designed to offer healthful recreation as well as promoting the fluid circulation of city traffic around its outer ring road, famously called a 'racetrack' by Charles Dickens). A letter to *The Times* of 1 September 1838 from a resident of Bayswater was rather more complimentary, issuing a fierce celebration of the legacy of royal emparkment in providing oases of green in an ever-crowding cityscape that otherwise would have been 'deprived of its lungs'.<sup>15</sup>

In the formation of new enclaves, meanwhile, could be found decisive evidence of a maturing – and irrefutably modern – bodily discourse that saw the worlds of environmental and social wellbeing as ineludibly connected. A brand new space, Victoria Park, London, sprang from a sense of concern about environmental decay in an urban setting and its effects on poor residents. A park was seen as a way of creating open space to serve as a buffer to stop spreading epidemics, for personal rejuvenation and fresh air, and a way of urban improvement and social engineering in emparking (and thereby asserting control over) an area known as the resort of Chartists and criminals, the two terms synonymous to the ruling classes. William Farr, Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths wrote, 'A park in the East End of London, would, probably, diminish the annual deaths by several thousands ... and add several years to the lives of the entire population. The poorer classes would be benefitted by these measures ... But all classes of the community are directly interested.' An 1840 petition signed by 30,000 to Queen Victoria emphasised the interests of public health and personal wellbeing: 'Poor People, closely crowded in confined districts, have no open spaces in the vicinity of their humble dwellings for air, exercise or healthful recreation; circumstances which produce the most painful effects on their physical and moral condition.' These areas suffered high mortality, disease and epidemics through being not 'effectively ventilated' as well as encouraging fever and 'moral pestilence, which is partly produced, and greatly aggravated by the want of open spaces'. The palliative of green space represented a heady remedy. A motion to create the park was thereby approved in 1841 by Minister of the Office of Commissioner of Woods and Forests under the aim of improving the general health of London.<sup>16</sup>

In Paris, there had been some democratising of space after the Revolution – for instance the Tuileries and the Jardin de Luxembourg, the Jardin des Plantes

15. *The Times*, 1 Sept. 1838.

16. For William Farr's report, see: *Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons and Command, Vol. 16, Reports from Commissioners, Session 5 February-27 August 1839*, p. 80; Thomas Wakley (ed.), *The Lancet*, vol. 2, 1829 (London: George Churchill), p. 869.



and the Parc Monceau mentioned earlier – but the major impulse in large-scale emparkment came during the urban planning works of Napoleon III, who dedicated some 2,000 hectares of open space in the capital for public use, including four new parks (Bois de Boulogne, Parc Montsouris, Parc des Buttes-Chaumont and the Bois de Vincennes), each arranged on a compass axis across the city. Interestingly, while Haussmann's urban blueprint for the city – wide, straight grand avenues – seemed to owe more to Versailles geometry, Louis Napoleon had been inspired, in part, by his frequent strolls in London's Hyde Park while in exile and so the parks he established favoured a more informal style. A network of squares, which Alphand called 'green and flowering salons', accompanied this vision, aimed to bring green space within ten minutes' walk of all Parisians. Debates about ventilation, air and space were common – the urban planner acting as architect-physician seeking to circulate and ventilate the metabolic life of the city through engineering and verdant prescription. Irish horticulturalist, William Robinson, for instance, recounted a conversation with a Parisian friend in the Square du Temple about how

hundreds of children were running and jumping and filling their lungs with the country air that has thus been brought into Paris, we could not help saying to ourselves that, strengthened and developed by continual exercise, these youngsters would one day form a true race of men, which would give the State excellent soldiers, good labourers for our farms, and strong artisans for our factories.<sup>17</sup>

Across the Atlantic, impetus for the creation of Central Park came from a cadre of New York literati, journalists and social critics who lobbied intently for the designation of green space. In 1857, commissioners announced a competition for the design of Central Park. The winning Greensward plan was the brainchild of British architect Calvert Vaux and Connecticut landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted, and envisaged a rural idyll where urbanites could escape from city life to immerse themselves in the pastoral. Looming large in Olmsted's thinking was Birkenhead Park, opened in 1847 on Merseyside and designed by Joseph Paxton as a preserve of swirling greenery, dramatic outcrops and belt planting all navigated by pedestrian paths and carriage drives designed to aid movement and circulation. Olmsted visited in 1850 and again in 1859, writing effusively of the democratic spirit, civic pride and urban improvement planted in new park soil. Inevitably, too, his appointment as General Secretary of the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War exerted an influence on the medical and public health dimensions of the project. An advocate of the pastoral as both aesthetic and analgesic, natural scenery served, according to Olmsted, an innate benefit in its 'soothing and reposeful influences'. Preserving a fantasy of sylvan peace, the designers planted a tree belt around the park to screen

17. Alphand quoted in Jarassé, *Grammaire des Jardins Parisiens*, p. 134; William Robinson, *The Parks, Promenades and Gardens of Paris* (London: Forgotten Books, 2013 [1869]), p. 88.

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off the urban world, within which were meadows, water features and copses. Visitors navigated the entire two and a half mile long preserve via a series of winding footpaths, bridleways and carriage drives. In one sense, Central Park was consciously crafted in opposition to the city. As Olmsted motioned 'We want, especially, the greatest possible contrast with the streets and the shops and the rooms of the town ... We want depth of wood enough about it not only for comfort in hot weather, but to completely shut out the city from our landscapes.' And yet, its fundamental remit lay in making the metropolis liveable, to cure the ills of industrialism (notably exhaustion, nervous irritation, anxiety and depression, all of which emanated from the urban experience, as Olmsted saw it). It was, in the words of Betsy Klimasmith, a 'networked park.' Accordingly, a sense of unbounded nature within metropolitan space presented a sort of bucolic illusion, a living tonic for a city body whose forlorn trees had been 'deformed by butcherly amputations' and its people suffering 'functional derangements'. Later on, he spoke of his horticultural creation as providing 'lungs for the city'. Presenting himself as surgeon-arborealist, he pointed out that foliage 'disinfected' the air and uplifted both mind and body.<sup>18</sup>

## PARKS AS PUBLIC SPACES: THE CHANGING FABRIC OF HEALTHY RECREATION

The nineteenth-century park civilised the city by naturalising it. Formerly an enclave of aristocratic sport and entertainment, the park now represented an irrefutably public landscape and one fully integrated into the organic fabric of the modern city. Used to express ideas of unity, purpose, energy and healthful quality, the language of the body had marked this passage to democratic space. However, even in this incarnation, the city park rarely achieved perfect function as an egalitarian seat. While serving as public spaces for leisure, health and urban renewal, parks were ordered by racial, gender and class-based codes. Civic leaders read the park as a tool of socialisation; a way of counteracting deviance in urban society; and of instilling the working classes with respectable values. As such, it was an excellent 'fit' for the dual terrains of recuperation and control envisaged by the 'therapeutic landscapes' of the

18. F.L. Olmsted, 'Justifying Values of a Public Park', *Journal of Social Science* 12 (1880): 147-64; F.L. Olmsted, 'Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,' *The Journal of Social Science* 3 (1871): 22, 16, 15; F.L. Olmsted, 'Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters, 1886', from *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Supplementary Series I, Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems*, eds Charles Beveridge and Carolyn Hoffman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 477, 197; Betsy Klimasmith, *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), p. 61. For a detailed deconstruction of Olmsted's thinking, Central Park and the city as an imagined/ designed entity, see Luccarelli, *Eclipse of Urbanism*, pp. 187-215.

nineteenth-century municipal environment that included asylums, schools, hospitals and penitentiaries.<sup>19</sup>

Connected by the body – and its layered allusions of what Schrank and Ekici call ‘rejuvenation and anxiety’ – social reformers approached the park as an effective site for the cultivation of urban wellbeing. A healthy resort that inspired wholesome exercise, a restorative walk through the greensward provided a worthy alternative to other entertainment spaces (and their associated practices), including the saloon, music hall and cockfighting den. In the words of the 1833 British Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Walks (arguably the most influential legislative driver of emparkment for the purposes of social, political and physical benefit), the park offered a healthy alternative to the ‘drinking shops, where, in short-lived excitement they may forget their toil, but where they waste the means of their families and too often destroy their health’. At Victoria Park, locals asked for fetes, galas and fireworks, but the Board feared a reduction in rental values and preferred to emphasise more acceptable forms of recreation, notably strolling along paths next to carpet planted borders and some 32,000 new trees. In that sense, the park embodied an outdoor reform school, a teacher of morality through health and leisure – a corporal as well as corporeal city body. Civic leaders favoured genteel pursuits such as bird watching, walking and learning about new species in urban green space – all considered passive activities good for morality. Visitors to Central Park found themselves barred from walking on the grass, using obscene language, selling goods or engaging in ‘acts of disorder’. As Olmsted noted of park regulations: ‘if thousands of people are to seek their recreation upon it unrestrainedly, each according to his own special tastes, it is likely to lose whatever of natural charm you first saw in it’. There was also the issue that the park was not an inviolate enclave, protected as if by magic from pollution. As Stephen Mosley has illuminated, the stunted foliage and sickly vegetation of Manchester’s public parks suffered the same problems of smoke inhalation and air pollution as the rest of the city. Contemporary critics, accordingly, had fun with the city body metaphor. Discussing early wrangles over the creation of Central Park, the *New York Times* (1853) advised ‘if the Park be the lungs of the city, as the phrase goes, then the city has got the consumption, for its lungs are in bad case’ while Charles Dickens in *Sketches* (1843) remarked, ‘If the parks be “the lungs of London” we wonder what Greenwich Fair is – a periodical breaking out, we suppose – a sort of spring rash’.<sup>20</sup>

19. On social control and moral uplift in Britain’s public parks in the nineteenth-century, see Elliott, *British Urban Trees*, pp. 88–92.

20. Schrank and Ekici, *Healing Spaces*, pp. 1–2; Report from the Select Committee on Public Walks, Parliamentary Papers, vol. XV, 1833; *The Westminster Review*, No. XXXIX, January 1, 1834, vol. XX (London: Robert Heward, 1834), p. 507; F.L. Olmsted, *Mount Royal, Montreal* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1881), p. 26; Stephen Mosley, ‘The “Smoke Nuisance” and Environmental Reformers in late Victorian Manchester’, *Manchester Regional History*

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For all its ailments of manufacture, however, the park seemed to succeed in improving public health, or at least the perception of it. Peter Cunningham’s *Hand-Book of London, 1850* applauded Victoria Park, as ‘It serves as a lung for the north-east part of London, and has already added to the health of the inhabitants’. Nature provided uplift, horticultural interaction a kind of therapy servicing the needs of a metropolitan citizenry (with the possible exception of carpet-bedding, the ‘gaudy colours’ of which inspired ire in the pages of the *Gardener’s Chronicle*). The park remit as healing space was functional and flexible in the treatment plans it offered. As Reverend Andrew Suter of All Saints, Mile End, wrote in *The Times* of May 1866: ‘it is our sanatorium for invalids, the gymnasium for our young men, the playground for our children, and the only place where our unemployed ... can go, walk and sit and enjoy God’s fresh air without paying for it’. In reflecting on his many landscape designs, Olmsted agreed, citing how physicians had taken to recommending trips to the park, how infirm women and children were enriched by wandering its confines and convalescing patients found it helpful in recovery.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, in the latter years of the 1800s, public pressure saw a relaxation in behavioural codes and a more elastic approach to recreation, based often on popular demand for more strenuous sports (ball games especially) which were increasingly seen as physically useful for promoting health, as well as the inclusion of educational, scientific and arts facilities such as zoos and galleries. In the 1870s, patrons in Central Park took the law into their own hands by picnicking on the grass, and civic authorities responded to popular demands by additions including children’s playgrounds, athletic tracks and skating rinks. In Victoria Park, popular use of the Regents Canal for bathing gave early impetus to the construction of a bathing lake as a healthy alternative, although it was screened away from the paths to prevent it detracting from the promenades of respectable people. Highly popular, the lake was frequently by 1,000 bathers every day, making the water so foul that a series of lakes were constructed to cater for dirty punters and increase the water flow: healthy circulation of bodies and water lay at the heart of the remedial works. Football was finally allowed on park lawns in 1888.

## CONCLUSION: GREENERY, HEALTH AND THE PARK BODY

In the seminal paper ‘A City is Not a Tree’ (1965), architect Christopher Alexander remonstrated at the tendency of people to use a dendron metaphor

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*Review 10* (1996): 40–47; *New York Times*, 28 March 1853; Charles Dickens, *Sketches* (Leipzig: Bernh Tauchnitz, 1843), p. 107.

21. Henry Wheatley, *London Past and Present ... Based Upon the Handbook of London by the Late Peter Cunningham* (London: John Murray, 1891), 434; *Gardener’s Chronicle*, 23 Jan. 1864, 79; Suter quoted in Charles Poulsen, *Victoria Park* (London: Stepney Books and Journeyman Press, 1976), p. 41.

to explain the shape and flow of cities. As he saw it, the tree presented an ‘intuitively accessible structure’ that allowed for the visualisation of the city as a living system comprised of a network of synchronous relationships. Such a model, he argued, failed to encompass the convoluted social, economic and environmental organisation of the urban world and its ‘patina of life’. Alexander explained that ‘for the human mind, the tree is the easiest vehicle for complex thoughts. But the city is not, cannot and must not be a tree. The city is a receptacle for life’. The *longue durée* of park-life suggests a rather more tangled narrative at work (and play) in the figurative and physical landscape of urban space. Instead of a ‘theatre of arboreal cruelty’, the complex ecological history of the city park positions the tree, the lung and the city as knotted together in a dense thicket of urban pathology. Running throughout this story from classical times has been a conversation about public health, personal renewal and the positioning of green space as a social and environmental tonic. Such tenets came to maturation in the nineteenth century, when parks and public gardens emerged as critical discursive sites for chewing over the consequences of modern industrialism. This story continued throughout the twentieth century as these green enclaves became ever more embedded in urban space (from the Garden City movement and Le Corbusier’s radiant city without streets, concepts that effectively remade the city *as* park, to attempts to empark the post-industrial in New York’s High Line or Parc Andre Citroen, on the left bank of the Seine, further details of which can be found in Alan Tate’s paper in this volume). Mapping out an ‘ecology of the city’ based on ‘creative-fit-healthy environments’ in *Design with Nature* (1967), landscape designer Ian McHarg observed the necessity for an integrated approach to urban planning that saw social and environmental health as organically connected. As such, the city and the tree could not be easily extricated.<sup>22</sup>

It is, sadly, true to say that many twenty-first-century urban parks have lost their associations with restoration or vigour to become pariah landscapes, downtrodden, dirty and neglected horticultural canaries that serve to illuminate the demise of the inner city as a functional and living space, an appraisal evident in Alexander’s critique as well as in Jane Jacobs’ classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Artist Larissa Fassler’s ‘Regents Street/ Regents Park (Dickens Thought it Looked Like a Racetrack)’ (2009) entirely subsumes greensward by a road map, populated by shop and road signage, while in Joel Garreau’s ‘Edge City’, green space is marginal or entirely absent, replaced by urban sprawl, consumer culture, privatised land and car parks. According to landscape designer Tom Turner, the concept of urban green has become altogether *passé*, a place for people idly sitting on the grass

22. Christopher Alexander, ‘A City is Not a Tree’, *Architectural Forum* **122** (1) (1965), pp. 58, 61; Bruce Goodey, ‘Cut Down to Size: Christopher Alexander’s “A City in Not a Tree”’, *Built Environment* **8** (4) (1982): 258; Ian McHarg, *Design With Nature* (New York: Wiley, 1992 [1967]), p. 195.

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(invariably connected to technology) or a realm almost entirely claimed by the needs of canine ablutions. It is almost as though 'the park' has been crushed by the weight of its myriad historical uses, many of which cannot be realistically satisfied by ghettoised greenery. Turner's solution, accordingly, offers a twenty-first-century blueprint for the city based on 'harlequin space', multi-coloured, multi-functional and designed to speak to various cultural needs. As he puts it, 'green is not the only colour'.<sup>23</sup>

Championed, castigated and familiar to many, the city park presents us with a piece of horticultural salvage worth picking over. This brief wander into the landscape of urban green – an environmental history of place and people expressed in both material and vernacular terms – points to the value of a historically inflected approach that fully contextualises the 'patterned ground' of emparkment. In the words of celebrator Catie Marron, 'each park has its own soul' and yet connects urban-dwellers the world over by virtue of the central translatable tenets of park-life.<sup>24</sup>

In this entangled history of politics, prescriptions and planting, the city park has been consistently read according to a vernacular of health, biological synthesis and socio-environmental wellbeing. Invoked as an overgrown herbal remedy for the urban condition, the park represents a historical landscape of refuge and vitality. As a poem from 'John Workman' for the *Tower Hamlets Independent* put it, 'The din and rattle of the town, / The smoke and violent stench, / Confound the brain and pale the cheek' but 'our Park, so fair and wide, / Is refuge from our evils.' At once set apart from the city and yet also a powerful sustaining force, it became, in the modern lexicon of nineteenth-century public health, a key site where the sanitary language of bodies and bodily function could be exercised and embellished. One might contend that this language was relatively crude – expressed in terms of lungs, fresh air and healthy perambulation but rarely extrapolated on in minutiae – but it was deeply evocative and malleable enough to unite a range of constituencies from urban planners, to public health reformers, green romantics and medical professionals (much like Alexander's tree) by tying together historical associations of greenery and health with a modern, sanitary language of bodies, circulation and flow. As such, the park was situated as a vital organ in the physiological fabric of the modern city and a key imaginative place where broader ideas of circulation, network and modernity could be explored. Viewing the park through this multi-leaved ecology of history, space and body not only brings a fresh perspective to urban history (urban theorist Galen Cranz observes that 'whatever is decided about the function of parks will largely derive

23. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961); Tom Turner, *City as Landscape: A Post-Postmodern View of Design and Planning* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996), pp. 181, 189; Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

24. C. Marron (ed.), *City Parks – Public Places, Private Thoughts* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 12.



from some vision of the city'), but in its deployment of anatomical metaphor also presents useful common ground for historians of medicine, culture and environment to congregate.<sup>25</sup>

Placing the park within a functional urban metabolism, meanwhile, seems particularly instructive in helping to theorise a new approach to the liveable city that combines scientific judgements of 'natural value' with the historical: a connection which seems imperative in a twenty-first century world in which seventy per cent of humans will be city-dwellers by 2050. Significant here is the presence of a *consistent* historical narrative – stretching from nineteenth-century park designers, health reformers and period commentators to contemporary park practitioners, advocates and analysts – that fixes the park as a vital socio-environmental unit or biotic 'organ'. Latter-day critics may have written off landscape planners with their illusions of creating *rus in urbe* as idealistic romantics, captivated by the countryside, or anti-modernists horrified by the urban world, but recent evidence from the medical and physical sciences corroborates their germinating arguments as essentially sound. Concentrations of trees in urban enclaves *do* function as physical as well as figurative 'lungs', filtering hydrocarbons (carbon monoxide, ozone, particulates, sulphur dioxide), releasing carbon dioxide and even alleviating noise pollution and removing heat and wind from city landscapes. Likewise, psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan have measured the cognitive benefits of access to green space in terms of pleasure, relaxation and wellbeing while 'green exercise theory' has conclusively proven that exercise outside brings more tangible benefit than running on a treadmill (though a 'green hit' can be secured by watching nature on TV) in terms of elevating mood, relieving stress and endorphin release. Edward O. Wilson's biophilia concept posits that humans have an innate love for the natural and connect positively with other forms of organic life, while theories of evolutionary adaptation suggest that we may be programmed to see greenery in affirmative terms. It would be yet more interesting to find out if the human brain distinguishes between different types of horticultural design – pastoral, geometric, botanical, herbaceous, perhaps even (to the horror of the *Gardener's Chronicle*) carpet-planting. In any case, such findings illuminate the complex eco-cultural habitats to be found during a walk in the park.<sup>26</sup>

25. *Tower Hamlets Independent*, 22 June 1867; Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 240.

26. R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Comedia and Demos, *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal* (London: Comedia and Demos, 1995); Roddy Scheer, 'Parks as Lungs: America's Urban Forests Make Environmental and Economic Sense', *E: the Environmental Magazine* 12 (6) (2001): 15.