



# Understanding the Value of Urban Open Space

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THE RECENT SURGE IN THE UNDERSTANDING of the value of open space is remaking the economic, social, and physical health of cities worldwide.

At their best, cities are complex organisms functioning as the result of many systems working in parallel. The physical, sociological, and economic processes—among many others—that keep cities humming are innumerable. A breakdown of one has cascading effects that can lead to the collapse of the others; but, similarly, the runaway success of another has the capacity to lift yet others to success, by whatever measure success in a city can be measured.

Enlightened and forward-looking planning has largely preserved open spaces—parks, plazas, waterfronts—for public access and set aside a lot of space for public use and activity. This alone, however, is not enough to create great urban gathering spaces. The physical components of a city include the streets, buildings, and sidewalks within and around which urban denizens function day to day. Parks and open spaces provide the “lungs of the city,” a term credited to the great landscape architect Frederic Law Olmsted, who, along with his partner, Calvert Vaux, conceived of the expansion design of New York City’s Central Park, which originally opened in 1857.

Olmsted and Vaux won a competition to expand the park in 1858 from 778 acres (315 ha) to 838 acres (339 ha). By 1873, construction on Central Park was completed, and it remains the most-visited urban park in the United States by tourists, workers, and residents of the immediate neighborhoods bordering the park, as well as by others from throughout the region. Though a significant component of the physical construct of New York City, Central Park plays a pivotal role in the socioeconomic well-being of the city as well, opening its gates to people from all economic and social classes.

Jake Watkins, senior associate at Roger Ferris + Partners Architects in Westport, Connecticut, notes that “parks hold a resource critical to any urban landscape. In both the largest and the smallest cities, parks have historically provided needed space for recreation, social gatherings, and a general reprieve from the built environment. Holding a vision of how parks can be planned and used within the fabric of a city has created some of the most memorable urban moments of several of the greatest cities.”

Facing page: Historic urban open spaces such as Central Park in New York or the Champs-Élysées in Paris have become iconic references to articulate urban living. They continue to offer opportunities for flexible programming and design that engage communities and drive development.



UWE KEMPA, THE GATES, 2005



FREDERIC BISSON, LIGHTING AT AVENUE DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES, 2013



Parks also carry the flag for open space as a transformative brand; in other words, Central Park as a name carries value in the city, most markedly demonstrated by the high-end apartments and offices ringing its exterior. Such famed buildings as the Dakota and, more recently, 15 Central Park West, a 202-unit condominium tower completed in 2008 by Zeckendorf Development at a cost of \$950 million, derive their immense value from their proximity to the park.

Similarly, the 2010 opening of One Bryant Park, developed by the Durst Organization for anchor tenant Bank of America, signaled the pinnacle of urban open space. The \$1 billion tower—a model of green architecture—capitalized on the growth in popularity of Bryant Park and cemented the Bryant Park submarket as among the most expensive in the city. The park itself is the product of an ongoing 30-year-plus effort that transformed Bryant Park into one of the most densely visited parks in the world through an innovative public/private partnership between the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and the nonprofit Bryant Park Restoration Corporation.

Central Park and Bryant Park are two of the better-known examples of urban open space as a brand to drive positive economic impacts on their surroundings. Activity at the front door of a property—regardless of property type—affects real estate value. Oftentimes, what occurs on a day-to-day basis in the spaces between buildings determines desirability and, thus, value more so than the property itself. Take, for example, Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade or Paris's Champs-Élysées. Successful urban open spaces concomitantly promote physical, social, and economic well-being through intensive daily use by a variety of users throughout the year.

Tiffany Beamer, partner in the Los Angeles office of OLIN (designer of the 2015 ULI Urban Open Space Award finalist Washington Canal Park), lauds the sometimes-underappreciated effects of open space on community cohesiveness. "Our urban open spaces are the glue that holds our communities together—physically, psychologically, and socially. They are often taken for granted, as the absence of a building may translate into an absence of awareness of design, of place, of stewardship." Beamer continues, "What we know to be true is that the balance of great architecture and thoughtful landscape architecture—each supporting and feeding the other—is what makes our cities sing."

This variety of users, set against a backdrop of programming and design features singularly focused on usability, creates a sociological benefit to users and observers, and spawns a microeconomy to the benefit of surrounding property owners and businesses. When urban open spaces attract large numbers of visitors on a daily basis, when no special events are planned, they have become indelible and irreplaceable components of a neighborhood.

William H. Whyte, whose book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* brought the sociology of urban open space to the forefront of urban parks discussions, noted, "A good plaza starts at the street corner. If it's a busy corner, it has a brisk social life of its own. People will not just be waiting there for the light to

Facing page: The multiyear effort to rejuvenate Bryant Park has positioned the park as a key reference for urban regeneration and downtown reactivation. High attention to detail and dedicated programming ensure its viability, which also results in high volumes of people using the space on regular, nonevent days. The park has featured prominently in the emergence of a more welcoming New York City. But often lost in the accolades is the tremendous effect the rejuvenated park has had on the real estate submarket.



change. Some will be fixed in conversation; others in some phase of a prolonged goodbye. If there's a vendor at the corner, people will cluster around him, and there will be considerable two-way traffic back and forth between plaza and corner." In other words, parks are not inward facing, but rather embrace the neighborhood by pulling people in and letting the activity of the park filter out to city streets.

Because of the considerable—if not critical—sociological components of successful urban open space, innovative partnerships are often spawned, while other times public entities have the in-house know-how and ingenuity to create great public destinations. The Myriad Gardens Foundation of Oklahoma City, the nonprofit organization overseeing the Myriad Botanical Gardens, provided capital and operating funds for the Office of James Burnett's Myriad Botanical Gardens renovation, which has a permanent fund that is managed by the Oklahoma City Community Foundation. And Washington Canal Park in Washington,



KEVIN HARBETT/BRYANT PARK, 2012



D.C.—an OLIN- and STUDIOS Architecture–designed park—is managed through the nonprofit Canal Park Development Association Inc. (CPDA). Tasked with promoting, designing, building, and maintaining the park, CPDA includes representation from the public sector (the D.C. Housing Authority and D.C. Ward 6), the private development sector (W.C. Smith and JBG), and another nonprofit entity (Capital Riverfront Business Improvement District).

Public sector–driven urban open spaces are no less successful. For example, Singapore’s Urban Redevelopment Authority is both owner and designer of Marina Bay. The city of Chicago oversaw the development of Millennium Park, despite the inclusion of multiple designers and a complex and widely ambitious construction endeavor. Having been in operation for more than ten years now, Millennium Park has become a pivotal role model in this regard. In Santa Monica, California, Tongva Park and Ken Genser Square are managed by the city’s community and cultural services and public works departments, transforming a parking lot into a community-sourced, James Corner Field Operations–designed park. And, similarly, retaining SWA Group as lead designer of Thousand Lantern Lake Park Systems in Guangdong, China, was the result of the Nanhai District Government’s efforts.

In the realm of urban open space, for-profit, nonprofit, and government stakeholders each bring critical, and complementary, skill sets to their mutual goal of creating safe, attractive, and clean parks and plazas that drive economic development.

For-profit expertise includes negotiating experience—with vendors, consultants, and property owners, among others—to derive maximal value and operating efficiencies. Private sector management skills and the ability to execute in the absence of bureaucracy and red tape focus on a merit-based approach to performance metrics.

Nonprofit proficiency includes fundraising know-how critical to early-stage open space development, when a project vision is the only commodity and when momentum is only just materializing. Similarly, nonprofit groups can harness their community development experience to gather and reach consensus and bring in community programming partners to provide relevant and desirable park amenities, features, and programs.

Lastly, government and public sector involvement ensures a long-term view of public interest, providing a version of checks and balances to ensure that physical and social benefits are tantamount to financial gains for private interests, but still focused on economic development opportunities for the larger community. By bringing underused assets—for example, parks, plazas, and other open spaces—to the table, and by taking an entrepreneurial and opportunistic approach to planning, the public sector can set the table for the realization of transformative urban open space.

Even in cases where the public sector drives the development of a park, private sector buy-in is still essential in recognizing power to foster economic development. For this, “A critical component to the success of open space projects—especially in more challenging markets—is coordination [among] and buy-in from the for-profit, philanthropic, and public sectors; all three contribute in meaningful and necessary ways,” says Ben Donsky, senior project manager for BRV Corp., which creates, redevelops, and operates



parks, public spaces, and neighborhood streetscapes on behalf of real estate developers, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

Design, of course, creates the physical embodiment of the results of partnerships and visions. Successful urban open spaces need comfortable and inviting gathering places that both anchor and bolster civic pride, and simultaneously provide backdrops for special events and day-to-day activity. According to Sean Baumes, project architect for Honolulu-based WCIT Architecture, “Open space in and of itself is not enough to be impactful. The elements that form that space need to be designed to engage the spirit of the community it serves and reflect the distinct character of the context with which it is placed. In that sense, it’s less about the amount of money being spent or number of square feet needed and more about the thoughtfulness of the intervention.”

Transformative urban open space does not come easily. While the end product makes it seem as though the initial idea was a given, such is rarely the case. The “transformative” moniker has to be earned through the initial vision of a champion, or champions, and implementation by a committed group of stakeholders. Initial public and private support has to be built, funding secured and sustained, spaces designed and programmed, and ongoing management put in place.

Targeted efforts are required to maintain success over an extended period of time, and those efforts are unique to individual spaces; no single solution exists. Leadership, both public and private, is critical in the face of a sometimes-vocal minority that will seek to derail a plan based on an aversion to change. Transformative urban open space takes the best of the public and private sectors—long-term vision, financial stability, opportunistic management, and entrepreneurial planning—to increase livability and enhance property values.

“Successful open spaces embrace and augment their frames,” says OLIN’s Beamer. “Whether they are gardens, piazzas, or something in between, at their best they provide a platform for social interaction and expression of the most democratic type. All the living systems of the city mix in these places—people and nature and culture. Ultimately, geometry falls away, and success is measured by the extent to which open space design supports and elevates those living systems.”

Among the Urban Land Institute’s priorities is the creation of resilient communities. Eliminating obsolete space and putting it to highest and best use creates thriving communities. Urban open space put to such use becomes truly transformative by acting as a catalyst for the elimination of obsolescence and the creation of social and economic benefits.

Cities are complex, with many competing needs across social, physical, and economic strata. Transformative urban open space has the unique capacity to provide gains across each. Long-term visions understand the socioeconomic benefits of urban open space, and the potential for economic development spin-off effects that can persist over time and accrue to stakeholders of all types.

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# Transformative

Celebrating and promoting vibrant urban  
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# Urban Open Space

ULI Urban Open Space Award, 2010–2015

