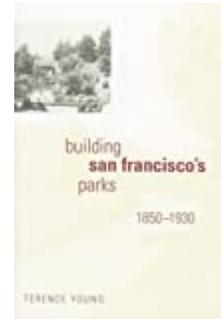


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Terence Young. *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. xi + 280 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-7432-1.



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Published on H-California (April, 2005)

San Francisco's parks tell a revealing story about the city's psychological past. This "instant city" was constructed in a Gold Rush-driven frenzy, and its civic leaders spent the following decades trying to prove that it was more than a frontier town.[1] Its extensive system of elaborate, expensive, and environmentally incongruous parks testifies to the power of its residents' collective status anxiety as well as their faith in the moral and social benefits of natural landscapes and outdoor recreation. Terence Young's contribution to historical geography puts the construction of these parks into their cultural and intellectual context. He describes shifting the values of the past and how these values were inscribed into the city's landscape. His primary subjects are the men who carried out the quest for nature, greenery, and grandeur, painstakingly transplanting the scenery of East Coast and European parks onto the shifting dunes of a windswept peninsula.

Young provides a framework for his analysis by naming "the virtues," which he has inferred from elite park advocates' rhetoric: public health, prosperity, democratic equality, and social coherence (p. 3). He then divides the park movement into two periods, during which these virtues shifted in their relative importance: an initial Romantic phase (1860s-1880s), in which natural landscapes

were cultivated for their uplifting moral and spiritual properties (mostly for the elite), and a rationalistic period (1880s-1920s), when the utilitarian value of parks as recreational spaces was seen as important for all segments of society. He stresses the significance of parks as instruments of social reform, quoting the moralistic language of reformers and philanthropists so familiar to historians of this period. Young then outlines the nineteenth-century park movement, focusing on the career of the man whose work inspired San Francisco's parks: Frederick Law Olmsted. While Olmsted did not have a direct involvement in San Francisco parks, Young describes his ideas and designs in some detail, devoting special attention to New York's Central Park. In doing so, the reader later realizes that he is recreating the very research that was done by San Francisco's lesser landscape architects.

After a somewhat lengthy description of the state of the city's public spaces, gardens and resorts in the 1850s and 1860s, as well as more on Olmsted's career and his unrealized plan for the city, in the second chapter, Young finally begins the horticultural odyssey that is the most compelling part of the book: the creation of Golden Gate Park. Its site was chosen by politicians bounded by debt ceilings and more concerned about recalcitrant squatters

than about soil or topography. The long rectangle of nearly 1200 acres mimicked Central Park, extending to the ocean but fairly distant from the developed north-eastern neighborhoods of 1860s San Francisco.

As Young describes in impressive detail, transforming the desolate landscape of this site into a verdant nineteenth-century park ideal was no small feat. The challenge was assigned to a youthful William Hammond Hall, an engineer and surveyor by training. The first major problem was simply securing the sands so that desirable plants, most importantly trees, could grow. After a number of failed experiments and a major breakthrough thanks to his horses' stray oats, Hall discovered an effective combination of groundcovers and small trees that could stand up to the Pacific gales and stabilize the sandy soil. From there, the process of creating the desired park was mainly a matter of time, as plantings proceeded in stages until a mature sylvan landscape was achieved. Young details the plants chosen and explains the meaning and purpose of every element of its romantic, naturalistic scenery that was, of course, consciously designed and carefully planned by Hall, who educated himself in landscape architecture with an exhaustive survey of existent theory and design.

In the meanwhile, the new Golden Gate Park enjoyed enormous popularity, and Hall's progressive successes were widely praised and credited with improving public health and enhancing the city's prosperity. Nevertheless, Hall lost his position as superintendent of San Francisco's parks in the financial and political turmoil of the 1870s (which Young describes with subtlety). In 1886, John McLaren, born in Scotland and with formal training as a gardener as well as a landscape architect, was appointed as superintendent of San Francisco's parks by a reformed Park Commission and presided over the system for fifty-six years. At the time of his appointment, Golden Gate Park was almost completely inaccessible to all but the wealthiest San Franciscans because of its remote location and a lack of mass transportation. McLaren set out to remedy this situation and to enhance the usefulness and social benefits of San Francisco's parks generally. McLaren's political skill and emphasis on park development resulted in many of the structures, thematic gardens, and recreational facilities that are still well-loved elements of Golden Gate Park. He also facilitated an explosion in smaller parks and playgrounds throughout the city with the backing of San Francisco's powerful Progressive mayor, James Phelan.

Young's attention to "the virtues" acknowledges the

importance of sincere Progressive Era ideals and adds to a growing body of intellectual history countering the skepticism of the "organizational synthesis."^[2] Young takes his subjects at their word, rejecting the notion that Progressive reformers were consciously taking part in social control and simply mouthing ideological justifications (p. 212 n. 4). Claims that parks promote public health by providing emotional and spiritual as well as physical invigoration are easy to understand, and Young demonstrates that the connection between increased property values in park vicinities leading to more city revenue (and therefore benefitting everyone) was recognized early on. While the sincerity of efforts to promote democratic equality and social coherence through parks are a little harder to accept at face value, Young's perspective is certainly justified as a counter to the recent disparagement of San Francisco park design by a less sympathetic, more environmentally sensitive geographer.^[3]

Even with thorough and meticulous research and a scholarly tone, Young manages to develop compelling characters, create vivid images, and bring the reader into the world of San Francisco at the turn of the century. He explains the city's eagerness to achieve greatness, a phenomenon that had more than a little influence on civic life and the development of the city. His political contextualization of park creation is masterful, demonstrating a complex appreciation for the bureaucratic machinations and power struggles of a nineteenth-century city.

Young's affection for San Francisco's parks and respect and sympathy for the men who created them is evident throughout this book. The portraits he paints of park advocates are certainly convincing; it is hard to doubt the sincerity of their belief in the good that can come through park construction. His preface ends with an admonishment: park advocates "despite their faults, prejudices, and misconceptions ... earned our recognition and gratitude, and their handiwork deserves our support and protection" (p. xiv). In some ways, this book is more tribute than history.

Despite the many strengths of this book, Young's meticulous research cries out for more ambitious analysis, or at least broader contextualization. Young describes his work as a "case study" early on, although the suggestion that this work provides an analytical framework that can be applied to the park movement in the United States generally is never explained or demonstrated satisfactorily (p. xii). He emphasizes San Francisco's unique history more than its representative characteristics. The narrative traces the development of one

city's parks, their immediate ideological and cultural context, and the professional and intellectual milieu in which their creators operated. However, it does not give us a sense of larger trends or meaning, and leaves many obvious questions unanswered. What does this story tell us about the legacy of Progressivism generally? How do San Francisco's "romantics" and "rationalists" fit into larger ideological or social trends? How does San Francisco's experience relate to that of other cities, particularly in the U.S. West? His lengthy footnotes offer little satisfaction, primarily adding more detail to an already richly textured narrative. It seems that Young's research began and ended in San Francisco—he did not make the effort to develop a larger national context for his book, only looking beyond the city to find the direct precedents and models that his subjects were themselves focused on. In the end, I was disappointed, wishing for an interpretation that would give me a better sense of this history's significance. However, this book is engaging, especially for anyone who has spent time in San Francisco. Golden Gate remains a beloved park for good reason, and Young's story brings its history to life, adding intimacy and meaning to the experience of visiting it.

Notes

[1]. Gunther Barth, *Instant Cities: Urbanization and the Rise of San Francisco and Denver* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[2]. For discussion of the "organizational synthesis," and its portrayal of the Progressive Era see Luis Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," *Business History Review* 44 (1970): pp. 279-290; and Richard L. McCormick, "The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism," *American Historical Review* 86 (1981): pp. 247-274. Important recent intellectual and cultural accounts of Progressivism are Daniel T. Rogers, *Atlantic Crossings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[3]. Grey Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

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Citation: Louise Nelson Dyble. Review of Young, Terence, *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.

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