

Terence Young. *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930.* Creating the North American Landscape Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. Illustrations, maps. xvi + 260 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-8981-3.



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The Limits of the Politics of Park Design and the Autonomy of Nature

Urban parks are tricky but alluring places for historians and geographers. They are unique physical spaces in the urban environment that humans have shaped and reshaped over time according to shifting social, political, and cultural attitudes toward nature and cities. People have designed parks to produce a better society, yet, as urban environmental historians are quick to point out, humans are not the lone actors in the construction of park spaces. Park design is also influenced by autonomous nonhuman natural forces that change parks and inform human responses and approaches to the making of park landscapes. Terence Young's case study of San Francisco's parks, while chiefly concerned with political and social factors that influenced park space in the city, also recognizes the physical materiality of park creation and the limits of the politics of park design. In doing so, this comprehensively researched and well-composed book indirectly offers scholars the opportunity to consider the role of nonhuman nature as an actor in urban park history.

Golden Gate Park dominates Young's narrative of the

early history of San Francisco's parks. He begins with a thorough review of the American parks movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, explaining how San Francisco came to acquire its first large landmark urban park. Young traces the major figures, events, and trends in the development of urban parks in North America, beginning with the creation and construction of New York City's Central Park in the 1850s. According to Young, the work of pioneering landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux was profoundly influential and guided the creation of similar large city parks, including Golden Gate Park. Ironically, Olmsted produced a report for the city of San Francisco in the 1860s advising against trying to replicate Central Park on the north coast of California, because of its arid climate. But the example of New York's famous park had become so iconic that park advocates in San Francisco attempted to emulate its design and principles through the creation of Golden Gate Park in 1870, a more than one-thousand-acre rectangular parcel of land on the southwest side of the city. This concise opening chapter alone will likely

serve as a useful resource for students and researchers interested in park history.

Following sociologist Galen Cranz, Young divides his narrative into two major phases in urban park design: a mid-nineteenth-century romantic period, during which park designers sought to create naturalistic rural oases within cities as refuges for enervated urban men; and a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rationalistic period, during which reformers sought to make usable park spaces for active leisure and exercise. These two phases in park design influenced the shape of Golden Gate Park and the subsequent expansion of San Francisco's park system in the early twentieth century. Using Golden Gate Park as an example, Young argues that this transition between romantic and rationalistic park design was not abrupt and that elements of romantic design carried over into the rationalistic period. Young concludes his book around 1930 when San Francisco's park system had expanded beyond Golden Gate Park to include numerous smaller neighborhood parks and playgrounds.

The overriding tension in this book is the relationship between park advocates' perceptions of nonhuman nature and the limits of the natural environment of San Francisco. Both romantic and rationalistic park designers sought to harness elements of the natural world to improve what they saw as the flawed environment of the city in order to produce a better society. Young identifies four virtues associated with parks: public health, economic prosperity, democratic equality, and social coherence. Parks offered an improvement of both the urban environment and urban society.

Golden Gate Park was the city's first great test of this movement to improve society through improvement of the natural environment of cities. The original site of the park was known as the "sand-waste site," a landscape dominated by dry westerly winds, sparse desert vegetation, and shifting sand dunes. The city park commission's initial challenge was to transform this landscape into one that conformed to the temperate climate and vegetation of Central Park, a romantic park landscape. Using specialized and experimental plant growths, the first park superintendent, William Hammond Hall, managed to fix the sand dunes in place and encouraged the growth of succession plants and eventually trees on the

particularly dry and sandy western end of Golden Gate Park. This attempt at wholesale reconstruction of the physical environment of the park demonstrated the profound influence that nonhuman nature had on the design of the park. The sand dunes and arid climate limited Hall's ability to replicate Central Park in San Francisco. Instead, he had to cautiously select key plant species to achieve a similar landscape effect. Hall's chief concern was to improve the sand-waste site in order to reproduce the romantic pastoral landscapes of the east, which he believed would have a positive impact on the health and betterment of the urban population of San Francisco.

Young's research on the early efforts to alter Golden Gate Park's sand dunes provides readers with an excellent example of the autonomy of nonhuman natural forces in park creation, but he does not develop this idea further in the book. Instead, Young's argument is attentive to the deep connections that park advocates saw between the built environment and the morality of urban society. They saw cities as flawed places that produced flawed people and believed that the judicious use of improved and idealized nature in parks could alleviate the ill effects of city life. This, according to Young, was the driving force behind the American parks movement.

Young's account of the creation and transformation of San Francisco's public park space in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is accompanied by very effective maps that chart this geographical change. While it adds to the urban park literature by placing some emphasis on the ecological limits of park design, the book echoes the traditional narrative of urban park history laid out by other scholars, including Galen Cranz, David Schuyler, Roy Rosenzweig, and Elizabeth Blackmar. Young's analysis does not go beyond or challenge the framework of the romantic and rationalistic phases of park design, which has dominated the literature on urban parks in North America. This framework is concerned largely with social, political, and cultural influences that shaped human perceptions of nature in parks and excludes the role of nonhuman nature as an autonomous force of change over time that placed limits on park design. Still, *Building San Francisco's Parks* is an important contribution to the history of parks in North America and provides a thorough case study of one of the continent's major urban park systems.

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