

Revitalizing Cities

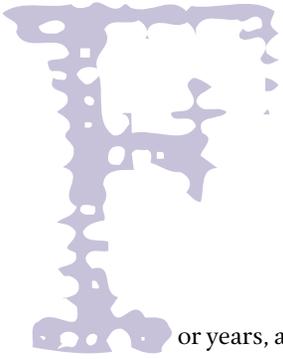
Urban parks, gardens, and recreational open space

**stimulate commercial growth and
promote inner-city revitalization.**



SUSAN LAPIDES

The Park at Post Office Square, on land formerly used for a parking garage, has become a magnet for new business investment in downtown Boston, Massachusetts. The garage is now underground.



For years, a two-acre parcel in the midst of Boston’s financial district was occupied by an unsightly, 500,000-square-foot concrete parking garage. But in the early 1980s, at the urging of surrounding businesses, the city joined a unique public-private partnership to demolish the structure and create a privately funded underground garage covered by a graceful park. Today, the Park at Post Office Square features a spreading lawn, polished granite walls, teak benches, a 143-foot formal garden, a walk-through sculpture fountain, and a café. Each day as many as 2,000 people stream up the escalators from the garage to jobs in the surrounding high-rises.

“Post Office Square Park has changed Boston forever,” wrote *Boston Globe* architecture critic Robert Campbell. “The business district used to be an unfathomable maze of street and building without a center. The park provides that center, and all around it, as if by magic or magnetism, the whole downtown suddenly seems gathered in an orderly array. It’s as if the buildings were pulling up to the park like campers around a bonfire.”

This rare open space in Boston’s crowded financial district has boosted the value of surrounding properties while providing an elegant green focus to a crowded commercial area. The city receives \$1 million a year for its ownership interest in the garage, and \$1 million in annual taxes. After the construction debt is paid, ownership of the garage and park will revert to the city.⁴⁰

“The garage that formerly filled that block was really a negative,” says architect and city planner Alex Garvin, who has written extensively on the role of open space in urban economies. “It simply wasn’t attractive for a business to be located opposite a multistory parking structure.” But with the parking relocated below ground and the park created on top, all that changed, particularly given that the park is not just decorative space but has become a popular gathering spot. “There’s a café there,” Garvin says. “You can sit in the park. It has become an attractive place where people want to be. And now that people want to be in the park, businesses want to be across the street from it and the value of that property goes up.”

Ask Michael Groman

“The creation of quality open space in the neighborhood translates into a quality neighborhood,” argues Michael Groman, manager of the Philadelphia Green Program of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

Recently, Groman’s department has been taking a novel approach to neighborhood stabilization in Philadelphia’s New Kensington neighborhood, where more than a thousand littered vacant lots were damaging property values and scaring away potential investors. Improper management of these properties was costing the community dearly, Groman says. “The idea was to try to reduce the drag that these vacant lots have on the community.”

Working with the New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC), Groman helped launch programs to improve the visual appeal of the properties and transfer some of them to adjacent homeowners for a nominal sum. “Greening and managing vacant land is a primary component in community development work,” Groman maintains. “Managing open space is not a luxury but rather a definite need.”

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—ROBERT CAMPBELL
Boston Globe architecture critic
on the Park at Post Office Square

Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan is credited with increasing occupancy rates and property values in the surrounding neighborhood.



BRYANT PARK RESTORATION CORPORATION



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Dan Biederman is cofounder of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation.

- ▶ A similar story comes from New York City, where nine-acre Bryant Park, beside the New York Public Library, was neglected and run-down until the late 1970s. Today, after a five-year, \$9 million renovation, the park boasts attractive lawns, flower gardens, news and coffee kiosks, pagodas, a thriving restaurant, and hundreds of moveable chairs under a canopy of trees. On some days, more than 4,000 office workers and tourists visit this green oasis in the heart of Manhattan, and more than 10,000 people come for special events.⁴¹

The park, supported by city funds and by contributions from surrounding businesses, has spurred a rejuvenation of commercial activity along Sixth Avenue. Rents in the area are climbing and office space is hard to come by. In the next five-to-seven years, revenues from park concessions will permit repayment of construction debt and make the park economically self-sufficient. At that point the park will no longer need city funds, although it will continue to feed the neighborhood's economy.

Spartanburg goes for the green

In the late 1980s at the request of city government, the local Flagstar Corporation of Spartanburg, South Carolina, selected downtown instead of a suburban site for a new corporate office building. Because part of the goal was to revitalize the downtown area, Flagstar executives realized that a single office building would not do the trick, so a formal corporate plaza and a traditional downtown park with flower gardens, walkways, benches, and lawns were added as magnets for downtown renewal.

The result? By 1993, property values in the central business district had increased

325 percent over their 1983 value. Retail sales had also risen, with some downtown businesses reporting increases of as much as 100 percent. Residential rents in the area have more than doubled since creation of the redevelopment and park. In all, more than \$250 million in investment flowed into downtown Spartanburg between 1988 and 1996. In the fall of 1996, officials announced a \$100 million development proposal that includes a four-star hotel, a conference center, a golf course, an exhibit hall, and new office and residential development.⁴²

To Dan Biederman, who helped organize the Bryant Park effort, the lesson is clear. “If building owners and the agents help protect urban open space they will be more than paid back for their efforts, both in increased occupancy rates and in increased rent—all because their building has this attractive new front yard.”

Similar projects are underway elsewhere:

- In East Boston, Massachusetts, plans are under way for a \$17 million, 6.5-acre park at the abandoned East Boston piers to serve as a locus of economic development along a new recreational waterfront. The new park offers playgrounds, gazebos, and views of downtown Boston.⁴³
- With the help of the Trust for Public Land, Santa Fe, New Mexico, recently acquired a 50-acre former rail yard—the last large undeveloped parcel downtown. The land will be used for a park and as a site for community-guided development.⁴⁴
- In Burlington, Vermont, a former 20-acre fuel tank farm will become a park on the Lake Champlain waterfront. Anticipating the economic benefits the park will bring, the city purchased an adjacent 25 acres as a reserve for future commercial development—land expected to appreciate as the park takes shape.⁴⁵



SUSAN LAPIDES



ERIC SWANSON

A greenway along the piers in East Boston, Massachusetts (above), a former rail yard in Santa Fe, New Mexico (left), and a lakefront park in Burlington, Vermont (below) are part of urban redevelopment efforts.



GLEN RUSSELL

Brownfields Payback

One way to preserve valuable landscapes while accommodating a growing population is to redevelop previously used urban lands—sometimes known as “brownfields.”

Even with the expense of environmental clean-up, a recycled parcel is often less expensive to develop than new land, because it is already serviced by roads, utilities, and other infrastructure. Brownfield development also limits the pressure to develop farms and other open space.

Since 1993 the U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency has been helping communities redevelop some of the nation’s estimated 130,000 to 425,000 brownfield properties, and these projects are already showing economic benefit:

- In Buffalo, New York, a 763,000-square-foot greenhouse on a former steel mill site produces up to 8 million pounds of hydroponic tomatoes each year and employs 175 workers.
- In North Birmingham, Alabama, a reseller of industrial byproducts has established a facility where a steel mill once stood. The business—

which will create 30 jobs—is the first tenant in a 900-acre brownfields target area that may eventually bring as many as 2000 jobs to the economically depressed neighborhood.

- In Emeryville, California, a hotel, office, and residential complex on former industrial property is expected eventually to generate as many as 10,600 new jobs. Future tenants include the biotechnology company Chiron Corporation, which will construct a 12-building, 2.2 million-square-foot campus over the next 20 years.⁴⁶

Blending housing with open space

Packaged together, affordable housing and open space can bring powerful changes to an urban neighborhood.

For years, the grounds of a former state mental hospital offered the only open space in the high-density Broadway neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio. This lovely site in the midst of the city contained a strip of green along meandering Mill Creek, flowering meadows, and gently wooded hills. But even though residents could see this space, it was off-limits and patrolled by guards—fenced, contaminated, and littered with trash.

Residents were eager to see the site developed as a park, but the Cleveland Metro Parks Department balked at the idea of tearing down the buildings, arguing that the department was in the business of preserving and maintaining natural lands, not restoring already developed sites.

Eventually, the Broadway Area Housing Coalition (now known as Slavic Village Development) came up with a plan for the 100-acre site. The goals were to preserve the best of the open space and attract middle-class home buyers to an inner-city development. Planners also wanted to connect the open space to 45-foot Mill Creek waterfall—the tallest waterfall in Cuyahoga County—long blocked from public use by railroad tracks, bridges and buildings.

The mental hospital was torn down, and the contamination was cleaned up. A private housing development of 217 units is being developed on 58 acres of the land. Parkland totaling 35 acres will include the stream corridor and trails connecting to the waterfall. Houses along the park are selling as quickly as they are built, and entrepreneurs are leasing properties near the waterfall, which is expected to attract 40,000 to 50,000 visitors each year. Community residents are delighted at last to have access to open space.⁴⁷

The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site has brought stability and investment to its Atlanta, Georgia, neighborhood.



PETER BENEY

► Parks for Community Revitalization

American cities large and small are creating parks as focal points for economic development and neighborhood renewal. “Revitalizing public parks is a phenomenally cost-effective way to generate community economic development,” says Steve Coleman, a Washington, D.C., open space activist. “If you think of [a park] as an institution, it can be a site for job training, education, or cultural performances.”

Coleman has been active in revitalizing Washington’s secluded and long-neglected Meridian Hill Park, which stands on a hill with a distant view of the White House. In 1990, Coleman and his neighbors organized Friends of Meridian Hill to restore the park as a neighborhood asset. An Earth Day clean-up and celebration was held, complete with a blues concert. Park activists encouraged youth groups to schedule events in the park. Today, the restored park is frequented not only by residents, but by busloads of tourists who enjoy the multiethnic ambiance of the Meridian Hill neighborhood. Visitation has tripled, and many park visitors patronize local restaurants and retail businesses. Occupancy rates in surrounding apartment buildings have soared.

A similar story comes out of Atlanta, Georgia, where the expansion and restoration of the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site has sparked a revival of the African-American “Sweet Auburn” neighborhood. The Trust for Public Land—which began acquiring properties for the historic site in the early 1980s—recently acquired several more historic homes and demolished a dilapidated factory to provide land for the park. The improved site, with additional open space, has become a catalyst for community reinvestment. Crime is also down. Dozens of homes have been built or restored, and the site’s 500,000 annual visitors have bolstered neighborhood businesses.

None of this would have been possible without the investment in the national historic site, says real estate developer Bruce Gunter, who has developed nonprofit, low-income housing within the district. “The National Park Service is



CAROL COLLARD

Bruce Gunter.

The whole point is to try to keep the middle-class families that are living there and to attract others. The park will be a real anchor for an in-town middle class.

—BRUCE GUNTER
Atlanta real estate developer

there for the long haul,” Gunter says. “People considering commercial or residential development can be confident that the benefits of the park aren’t going to disappear.”

Gunter and others are now planning a greenway park along the new Freedom Parkway, connecting the King Historic Site, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Center, and Atlanta’s downtown. The park will contain bike trails, benches, and street lighting and will be what Gunter calls, “a real-life, honest-to-God, throw-a-Frisbee, get-a-drink-of-water, have-a-picnic kind of a park.” Gunter and other businesspeople are helping to raise money for the park, which should boost property values and spur business along its length.

“This is pure market economics at work,” Gunter says. “There are eight neighborhoods that surround this parkway, and they will all be strengthened. The whole point is to try to keep the middle-class families that are living there and to attract others. The park will be a real anchor for an in-town middle class.”

Paul Grogan, former president of Local Initiative Support Coalition (LISC), a community development group in New York City, agrees that open space can play a crucial role in revitalizing low-income, inner-city neighborhoods. “Low-income neighborhoods are principally residential neighborhoods where the economics have gotten weak because of depopulation and disinvestment,” Grogan says. “The key to restoring their economic vitality is restoring the residential vitality. The residents of such communities regard quality open space—parks, ball fields, and gardens—as vital to the health of their community.” ■

Ask Frederick Law Olmsted

As early as the 1850s, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted justified the purchase of land for New York’s Central Park by noting that the rising value of adjacent property would produce enough in taxes to pay for the park.

By 1864, Olmsted could document a \$55,880 net return in annual taxes over what the city was paying in interest for land and improvements. By 1873, the park—which until then had cost approximately \$14 million—was responsible for an extra \$5.24 million in taxes each year. ⁴⁸



ROBERT CADENA

Community parks and gardens bring vitality to urban neighborhoods. Creston Avenue Community Playground, Bronx, New York.