

World Urban Park European Conference in Wirral 16th to 19th of October 2017

The conference took place in New Brighton, Wirral, outside of Liverpool. Close to the venue there is the Birkenhead park, opened in 1847 as the first publicly sponsored park for the general public in the world. Such is the claim, although speakers from Germany and myself pointed to other parks that were opened to the public or created for the public a bit earlier. However, the Birkenhead park is seminal in that Fredrick Law Olmstead visited the park in 1850, then went home to New York and, inspired by what he had seen, started designing Central Park, which opened in 1856.

Two days of excursions around Manchester preceded the conference. During those excursions we met with parks and people involved in parks of different kinds.

World Urban Parks

Gil Penalosa, Chair of the board for World Urban Parks stressed how vital parks and green infrastructure is. He cited *Fredrick Law Olmsted*, who designed Central Park, who stated that “People in New York hate each other – they should meet in the park.” Gil also noted that there is a tremendous lack of green spaces in the US, with 40 percent of the population not having a park within ten minutes of walk. At present cities are built without parks in many places in the US, but Amazon is looking for a new place for its HQ wanting a place with good access to parks. Life expectancy differs up to 25 years within some cities and it is related to the access to green areas. A speaker from England pointed out that obesity is going to cost Great Britain £40 billion per year in the near future (kolla), something that access to green spaces could reduce substantially.

At a work-shop Gil led a discussion on the situation for World Urban Parks and what initiatives were under way. There were suggestions for making field trips and technical tours for members, organizing webinars (seminars over the Internet), which can be handled by Indiana university. Richard Murray suggested that World Urban Parks must broaden its perspective to include urban planning. Also, he advocated that friends organizations should be encouraged to become members, since they have a genuine interest in finding international support for their causes.

Serious situation in England

Much, of course, had to do with English parks. England – differing from Scotland and Wales – very centralized. Most of the revenue that local councils depend on comes from the national government, up 80 percent the councilor of Wirral told us. And the national – Tory – government promises to cut down on its contributions, maybe even to zero. Local taxes make up a negligible portion. And the national government has put a cap on local taxes, slightly eased in later years. Therefore, all around the country, there are cut-backs on budgets for parks. According to one survey 56 percent of all local authorities plan on selling some park or parkland. A great deal of discussion centered around this situation and how to tackle it. I have heard stories of a similar kind from Germany and the United States but not this alarming. Ireland, according to *Margaret Gormley*, is in a very different situation, money is not a problem. Likewise in France, from where *Ann Marchand* gave us a bright situation for historic parks such as *Parc de Saint Cloud* and *Parc de Sceaux*. These are 17th century parks, designed

by *André le Notre*. *Parc Pierre Lagravère* is a modern park along the Seine. Money does not seem to be a problem for these parks. The historic parks opened up to the general public in the 1840s.

Ros Kerslake, CEO of Heritage Lottery Fund, says in the *biannual report State of UK parks 2016* the following:

“It has been two years since our last State of UK Public Parks report. Sadly the downward trend in the condition of parks we predicted then looks set to continue and there is a danger that many parks and green spaces may fall back to a state of decline and neglect. Whilst we are working hard to help those parks where we have invested, our fear is that many of the UK’s parks and green spaces face an increasingly uncertain future.”

Kerslake noted a possibly rising interest in parliament regarding parks. In 2016 a hearing on parks to place in the parliament and there is a *House of Commons report on parks*. The Heritage Lottery Fund contributes £ 915 million per year to parks and other heritage sites.

A lot of work is now going on in the universities of Newcastle and Sheffield to calculate the benefits of parks. Several speakers use the term *Natural Capital Accounting*.

On my consistent questioning whether encroachments on parks did constitute a threat to the parks I got answers testifying that this was not the case. The speakers – then referred to formal parks. Broadening the question to include all green areas, the answer came promptly: Yes, that is an issue for green belts! Green belts are areas set aside in urban planning years ago, to hinder urban sprawl and provide city dwellers access to green open spaces. I had had a look at the map of Manchester, which is not a very green city, but nevertheless has some important green open spaces, among them the *Waterpark* along the Mercey river that runs to the west of the core of the city. These areas are not formal parks and are therefore not protected. A city council could decide at any time to build on these areas – the same goes even for some formal parks. “Formal” is a concept that can mean many things. The park may be set aside by a locally decided zoning law. That may be changed by the council. On my further question on how to protect these areas the councilor confessed that the sole revenue remaining for the council would be money from selling or letting the green land. So, in order to generate revenue for parks the council will have to sell or let green spaces for development!

There are fifteen *National Parks* in the United Kingdom. Unlike in many other countries, they are not owned by the government and they are mostly open farmland and forests. Why? Because there is little “pure natural areas” in the UK. We visited the *Peak District National Park*, the first national park designated in 1951. It is located in between Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool. It is pure countryside, with rolling hills, farms, serpentine roads, little villages. We visited Bakewell, renowned for “Bakewell pudding”. The village had turned into a formidable tourist town. In the midst of the national park presided Chastworth castle, a very large estate belonging, still, to the Earls of Devonshire.

The history of national parks in England is a long story of fight for the preservation of rural England. In the 1930s several organizations united to fight for public access to land, although owned privately. In cities most parks were at the time privately owned, reserved for neighboring residents. It took mass demonstrations of trespassing to finally get parliament to act. A 1931 government inquiry recommended the creation of a 'national park authority' to select areas for designation as national parks. However, no action was taken and public discontent grew, leading to the 1932 mass trespasses on Kinder Scout in the Peak District. Five men were imprisoned. Finally, 1949 is a landmark year as the labour government passes an Act of Parliament to establish national parks to preserve and enhance their natural beauty and provide recreational opportunities for the public.

The English and the English landscape

Chatsworth, located in the Peak district national park is a magnificent house and garden, where some people regard the birth of the English landscape park to have taken place. The Duke hired *Capability Brown* to remodel the landscape. The river/stream was given a more becoming run, meandering and forming little pools. The baroque garden was erased and substituted for large grassy lawns. Many trees were cut down to open vistas in various directions. New trees were planted in clumps – something that since then became very fashionable. He even perfected the horizon. Diametrically opposite to a long waterfall in the shape of a staircase he had a broad cut made in the forest on the opposing side of the valley. Symmetry. And lastly: he had the Duke move a whole village that took the view from the castle to behind a hill, where only the spire of the church now signals its presence.

What does this tell us about the English and their relation to nature and countryside? Nature – even the countryside – has to be beautified. It is not good enough as it is. Of course, this has produced some marvelous gardens, and English garden culture is renowned. There is a strong sense of or awareness of the need to preserve the cultural heritage of gardens and the English landscape. Will that be enough to save the heritage when funds are being cut?

An idea that was floated by different people is that Brexit will promote urban gardening and farming as a substitute for imported food. Already, in Scotland, all municipalities are required to have food production plans. In London there is fast growth of community gardening. Allotment gardens are very much in demand.

Will the friends save the parks and the landscape?

England has a lot of friends organizations. At the conference they are represented by the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Mathew Bradbury. They have 6.000 friends organizations as members. Unlike Swedish friends organizations these organizations are all volunteers, doing work in their parks. Bradbury asked specifically to get contacts with other organizations of a similar kind in other countries.

We visited two parks on our tour the first day, three if you include the *Bridgewater canal*, where we were also met by volunteers. The first park, *Walkden Garden*, is a small park, a couple of hectares of an old vegetable and flower producing farm that had greenhouses. When the owner died he had donated the property to the city in order for it to make a lovely garden out of it. In the mid 70s work started to create a flower garden, divided up in “rooms”, with hedges around them. There was never a master plan drawn up, the volunteers had worked on an ad hoc basis, with piece after piece of land. The city council has a prime responsibility but it is the volunteers who have decided and worked out the development, step by step. The council did until two years ago pay a gardener full time to work in the park. Now the maintenance and up-keep is executed by a contractor which does this in several parks. The volunteers we met said it had helped a lot that we were going to visit the park – it had been given a refreshing over-haul and looked much better now than three weeks ago. There is no legal protection of the park. The volunteers make up the protection, some of them living in villas or terraced houses but some living in apartments with no garden. Two councilors, sympathetic to the park, took part in the visit. They told about hard work to defend money for the park.

The second park, *John Leigh park*, was an open park with playgrounds, a bowling green and picnic areas. It connected very well with the surrounding city and at the Saturday afternoon it was filled with children playing and families picnicking. The land was donated by a wealthy person, John Leigh,

an industrialist in cotton. In 1917 he donated 14 acres (14/250=56 hectare) to the city of Altrincham. Now there is tennis, football, basket ball, jogging, dog-walking and a children's playground, set in a very beautiful landscape of big trees and grassy hills. The park is owned by the city but much of what is going on is taken care of by the volunteers.

Next on the program was the grand estate of *Dunham Massey*. The park had belonged to the Earl of Stamford who left it to the National Trust in 1976. The house dates back to Elizabethan times and has a large collection of clothes, silver ware and household objects. Our interest lay in the park. There some 150 fallow deer live on 300 acres (=1,2 square km). It is land with large, old oaks and grassy fields and bushes. Manchester is not a very green region, so Dunham Massey to the south west of Manchester, on the periphery of the larger conurbation, plays an important role for people in and around Manchester.

The *National Trust* was founded in 1895 by *Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley*. From the outset it was not beautiful mansions, heritage buildings and parks that were to be preserved. It was green open space that was the aim to preserve for the ordinary men of the growing cities, at that time filled with smoky factories. *Tristram Hunt*, in an account about Octavia Hill writes: "It was from her time in the bleak, treeless housing estates that Octavia became convinced of the need for open spaces for the urban masses, 'a few acres where the hill top enables the Londoner to rise above the smoke, to feel a refreshing air for a little time and to see the sun setting in colored glory which abounds so in the Earth God made'. The result was a campaign for the opening-up of graveyards for the people, the saving of Parliament Hill from developers and then the creation of the Trust itself, so that London's fast-disappearing green spaces could 'be kept for the enjoyment, refreshment, and rest of those who have no country house'. (www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

Today National Trust has 5 million members, receives endowments, has commercial incomes and receives occasional grants. It works as much with nature preservation as with heritage houses and landscape. It manages 2.500 square km of land and 2200 km of coastline as open spaces. It operates 500 heritage sites, houses and gardens. The budget for conservation projects was a bit over £100 million 2015/16. Most sites have friends' organizations that do part of the up-keep.

Not far from Dunham Massey we boarded a canal boat to go on the *Bridgewater canal*, considered to be the first "true" canal in England. It opened in 1761 for transport of coal from the Northwest of England to Manchester. Canals are surrounded by greenery and are an important part of the green infrastructure in the heavily developed English landscape. Also the canal, of course, has its friends' organization.

Green Flag

Green Flag is a recognition of a well-managed park. Recognition is granted after an application and an auditing procedure along specific criteria. A group of four people make up the secretariat but site visits are carried out by a large number of certified volunteer auditors, all around Great Britain. Up to now 1,000 parks have received the recognition and has been allowed to put up a Green Flag for 12 months. In order for the park to keep its recognition it has to apply every year. The site visits are performed by two people the first time, and one person if the park applies again. It costs £350 to apply, the same also the second and third times. Not only parks that are excellent are recognized, but also parks with management and budgets that show a strong commitment with excellency. Some 300 woodlands and nature reserves have been granted a Green Flag and 150 miles (250 km) of Canals.

The criteria range from accessibility, landscape conservation and promotion of biodiversity to having a sound strategic management plan, good consultation with citizens and good information. You can check them out on <http://www.greenflagaward.org.uk/how-it-works/judging-criteria/>

Since 2008 the Green Flag has been going abroad and established cooperation with local park organizations and institutions, such as Alnarp in Sweden. Sweden has one Green Flag, the *Ultuna Campus*, outside of Uppsala. Finland has a couple of parks with Green Flag, so has the Netherlands, Australia, Germany, Ireland and some other countries.

EU: Natura 2000 and Green infrastructure

There is a site (<http://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/>), where all Natura 2000 places are listed and described, type of terrain, ecological values etc.

Green infrastructure is a *strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas* with other environmental features designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services such as water purification, air quality, space for recreation and climate mitigation and adaptation. This network of green (land) and blue (water) spaces can improve environmental conditions and therefore citizens' health and quality of life. It also supports a green economy, creates job opportunities and enhances biodiversity. The Natura 2000 network constitutes the backbone of the EU green infrastructure.

Green infrastructure planning is a successfully tested tool to provide *environmental, economic and social benefits through natural solutions* and help reduce dependence on 'grey' infrastructure that is often more expensive to build and maintain.

The European Commission has developed a *Green Infrastructure Strategy*. This strategy aims to ensure that the protection, restoration, creation and enhancement of green infrastructure become an integral part of spatial planning and territorial development whenever it offers a better alternative, or is complementary, to standard grey choices.

(http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ecosystems/index_en.htm)

Torgeir Sørensen from Stavanger has coined the term green infrastructure many years ago. Stavanger is not a very large city and is surrounded by green areas. His work has been directed at preserving such areas and inhabitants access from the city. He has been able to acquire funding from health foundations for preserving and developing green infrastructure around the city. Thorgeir suggested that academic research on green infrastructure, biological corridors etc. is gaining speed. He also claims that the difficulty in preserving urban green in Norway is the notion that we have more green space than we need, too much forests – "you don't need parks!"

Julie Proctor, My Park Scotland, a crowdfunding organization, said that Scotland has its own policy on green matters. Now in place is a regulation that requires all local communities to plan for green open spaces.

The seminal importance of Birkenhead park

In 1847 a fairly large urban park was inaugurated outside of Liverpool on the Wirral peninsula. There were other parks open to the general public, but all had previously been owned privately or by a king. Birkenhead park was designed specifically for the general public and paid for by public means, taxes. It therefore set a precedent and the idea was picked up by *Fredrick Law Olmsted* who visited

Birkenhead in 1850 and transformed to Central Park in New York. There were several motives behind the creation of this park: to raise property values around the park, to give ordinary workmen a healthy place to recreate themselves, to provide children with playgrounds.

Not only was a large piece of land (125 acres=0,5 square km) set aside for a park, rather than buildings, in fact it had partly poor qualities for to build on, but the sums that were expended to make the park beautiful were considerable. The Commissioners hired a very renowned landscape architect, *Joseph Paxton*, to design the park. It resulted in a series of lakes, a “rockery” (place filled with large rocks, making up little hills), some specially designed structures such as a boat house, a Swiss bridge and an Italian lodge, several sports grounds such as bowling greens and cricket fields. The whole landscape was worked on and reshuffled.

Birkenhead park was a novelty also in that it brought nature – although beautified – into the urban fabric.

“All this magnificent pleasure ground is entirely, unreservedly and forever the people’s own.”
(*Fredrick Law Olmsted*)

Edward Kemp was an assistant to Joseph Paxton, when laying out the park in Chatsworth and later responsible for laying out the design of Paxton for Birkenhead. He later designed several parks and gardens in the Northwest of England. A symposium with very many renowned scholars on landscape architecture and parks contributed, among them *Chris Mayes*, Historic England, and *Paul Elliot* of Derby University.

Central Parks’ ups and downs

Doug Blonsky, President and CEO for *Central Park Conservancy*, a non-profit organization that manages the park since 1980 on a contractual basis with New York City, told about the creation of Central park but also about the ups and downs the park has been through. By the early twentieth century, vicissitudes of the social, political and economic climate threatened the fabric of the Park and caused its first serious decline. Robert Moses, park commissioner from 1934 to 1960, received federal funding for the restoration of many eroded landscapes and crumbling structures, and embarked on massive public programming for the post-Depression populace. When he left office, however, there was no management strategy for maintaining those improvements or educating Park visitors in proper stewardship, and for the next two decades the second — and most devastating— decline took its toll on the fragile 843-acre Park. The park was in sorry state in the early 1970s. It was a place where people were warned to go, meadows worn to the mud, trees broken and litter all over. It takes not only ingenuity and foresight to design and build a park, it also takes good management to keep it up. Today Central Park Conservancy, formed in 1974, operates the park, raises 75% of the needed money from private donors, and has a large volunteer organization.

A curious coincidence is that *Robert Moses*, who saved the park in the late 50’s, when he was a park commissioner, at the same time planned highways right through lower Manhattan, where *Jane Jacobs* fought his plans (Jacobs was NOT fond of large urban parks!).

Blonsky said the planners at the time the park was decided knew very well that sooner or later there would be developments all around the park. New York at that time was growing very rapidly. Nevertheless did they see the value of a large park in the midst of that large conurbation. Now decision makers and donors may fall back on a report (https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.centralparknyc.org/pdfs/about/The_Central_Park_Effect.pdf)

that contends that the park in 2014 brought \$1 billion yearly to the economy of New York City, added more than 2,000 jobs and raised property values by almost \$30 billion. 2014 the park is estimated to have had 41,8 million visitors (The Royal National City Park had 15 million).

Central Park Conservancy has set up a *Center for Urban Park Management*.

Other interesting parks

Queen Elisabeth Olympic Park, London. The park, 586 acres (=2,3 square km) was created to house several of the Olympic Games' arenas in 2012. The arenas constitute big infrastructure projects, but they were set in a park environment. Half of the Olympic park is located within the Lee Valley park that was created in East London in the 1960s, along the Lee river, and half of the Olympic park is newly created park area. The park plus a substantial development of housing and shopping malls apart from the sports arenas made a substantial contribution to efforts to lift disadvantaged East London. Of course, it has also caused protests and raised questions about destroying social networks. It is an interesting project in that it uses parks and green infrastructure as a way to make a city attractive. *Mark Camley*, Executive Director of Parks and Venues, London Legacy, that operates the whole area, presented the park.

Rivierenhof, Antwerp. *Peter Verdyck* told about the great remake of the park. Its origin is a private park that was donated to the city of Antwerp and opened in 1921 to the general public. 15 years ago a total reorganization of the park was decided with the aim to make the park "the most beautiful, complete park ...". This entailed reserving a large portion in the midst for pure nature and parkland, whilst sports arenas, playgrounds and amusements were to be located on the periphery. The park has a very ambitious educational program. It is visited by 25.000 children per year that take part in various educational activities.

Forest reserve in Kepong, Selangor, Malaysia. *Noor Azlin Yahya* told about the 545 hectare urban forest 20 km outside of Kuala Lumpur city center. It is surrounded by developments and the pressure from visitors is so strong that only a part of the forests – 10 hectare – is open to the general public. It is managed by the Forest Research Institute in Malaysia and used for research.

Rothschild Memorial Nature and Park, Israel. The park was presented by its manager, *Hugo Jan Trago*. The park is located a bit outside of Tel Aviv and is a donation confirmed by law in 1958. Its area is only 10 hectare but its influence extends far beyond that. It is situated in an agricultural landscape and takes some responsibility for the surrounding 500 hectare of agricultural land. This is motivated by the importance for the park itself first hand, but is of course also of interest for the area as a whole. The park is now engaged in a renovation of a quarry outside of its premises.

The Gateway Arch National Park, Saint Louis, USA. Saint Louis, USA, is undertaking a major renovation of its city center, which up to date has been a derelict, run down, slummy center, due to the decline of the once great city. The undertaking focuses on a great arch that is to symbolize the colonization of the west of the USA. The project is called the Gateway Arch National Park. There are green parts, but there is also a lot of concrete and stone, in order to cover roads and rails etc. in the city center. In order to loosen the soil, often very hard in such areas, the project used a special kind of – non edible – carrots. Along the Mississippi there is a 7,5 acre large green stretch. The park also houses a new museum about the colonization of the west. This park is compared with similar parks in city centers, like the Mall in Washington DC and Centennial Park in San Francisco. *Eric Moraczewski* from *Urban National Parks* in the US, who presented the project, also told that the National Park

Service has had the same budget for 40 years, while adding 40 percent more parks. 50 percent of the costs of the Gateway Arch National Park project have been covered by private funds. Jefferson Park Foundation has been a big contributor. The public part has been financed through a special county sales tax. The project has stimulated private business in making investments in the area of \$ 2 billion. Hopefully this will reinvigorate the downtown area.

Royal parks in England and Ireland. Margaret Gormley and Simon Richards told us about the royal parks of England and Ireland. Phoenix park in Dublin is from the outset a royal park. An exhibition shown in both London and Dublin tells the story about the royal parks, numbering eight and adding up to 5.000 acres (20 sq km). A little know park is Bushy park, in west London. Both stressed the many uses parks can have. Bushy park was used for vegetable growing during WWII. In 1851 the first public toilets were opened in Hyde Park, London. Some time during the 17 hundreds it was fashionable to drink milk Hyde Park. These royal parks in England have an enormous amount of visitors, 47 million per year. It takes € 40 million per year to operate them.

City National Park and a city in a garden. At present there is an initiative to create, what is called, *Greater London National Park City*, an initiative that aims to preserving all that is green or blue and develop the green infrastructure in Greater London (GL). *Nigel Thorne* presented a somewhat worried picture but with some bright spots. Air pollution is still a big problem in London, which spurs interest in greening the city (as in many other cities around the world). There are 3.000 parks and green spaces in GL but the greenery is fragmented. Coordination is difficult with 33 boroughs. He mentioned *Natural Capital Accounting* as a vehicle to argue for investments in green infrastructure. In the *London Plan* green is treated but only quantitatively. More hope is gained from the *Mayoral Environment Strategy* (still a draft). There is also a *Green Infrastructure and Open Environments Plan: the All London Grid* since 2012. All of this looks very interesting and relevant for other big cities and is worthy of closer study.

Nantes in France on the contrary has coined another vision: the city in a garden.

Finland's national city parks

By now Finland has eight national city parks. The largest one is *Hangö* national city park, which contains both the city of Hangö and a vast archipelago. There are more cities that are planning to apply for having such parks. Finland copied the Swedish legislation for national city parks very quickly but added an important clause. Any city can apply for having a national city park. Applications are handled by the Ministry of Environment. A city is granted to have a national city park if it fulfills certain criteria (which look very much like the motives for creating the Royal national city park in Stockholm. Se http://www.ym.fi/sv-FI/Natur/Naturens_mangfald/Naturskyddsomraden/Nationalstadsparker/Ansokan_om_att_inratta_en_nationalstadspark).

Urban parks in complex and chaotic times

My talk addressed the situation for parks, especially large urban parks, now that cities grow faster than ever. The Royal National City Park was created in times of decline for most cities in the West part of the world. Also Stockholm had for a couple of decades been stagnant. Now Stockholm like most other cities around the world are growing faster than ever. Today it would be much more difficult to create a large urban park like *The Royal National City Park in Stockholm*. Most city building around the world forgets to create large, green open spaces. UN Habitat in adopting a *New Urban*

Agenda (NUA) has not high-lighted the importance of greenery in cities, which is astounding considering that the NUA addresses especially cities in the developing part of the world, where problems of clean air, fresh water, dampening of the heat island effect, flooding, recreational areas etc. is more important than in other parts of the world. At the same time cities, when growing, are becoming even more spread out, less dense. If the call to build more densely was adhered to, there would be plenty of room for large urban parks. However, there is a new awakening regarding green infrastructure. The European Union has acknowledged its importance and a city like London is creating its London City National Park, in an effort to tie together all that is green and blue within its boundaries. There are other examples, as well.

Richard Murray

President Ekoparken Association and co-chair Large Urban Parks Committee

To view the full program got to www.wupec17.com