

L673: Urban Experience
Fall 2006
Prof. Hanson

Rittenhouse Square field trip
Thursday, October 19, 2006

After we return from the park, log on to Blackboard to post observations and thoughts about your time here today in a discussion forum I have created. Here are selected passages from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* to ponder as you sit and observe the lunchtime scene at the park:

The public peace—the sidewalk and street peace—of cities is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves.

On the social life of city sidewalks:

A well-used street is apt to be a safe street.

A city street equipped to handle strangers, and to make safety a safety asset, in itself, out of the presence of strangers, as the streets of successful city neighborhoods always do, must have three main qualities:

First, there must be a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space. Second, there must be eyes on the street... Third, the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously.

The activity generated by people on errands... is itself an attraction to still other people.

The social life of city sidewalks is precisely that they are public. They bring together people who do not know each other in an intricate, private social fashion and in most cases do not care to know each other in that fashion.

A public character is anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people and who is sufficiently interested to make himself a public character. A public character need have no special talents or wisdom to fulfill his function—although he often does. He just needs to be present, and there need to be enough of his counterparts. His main qualification is that the he *is* public, that he talks to lots of different people.

On the uses of neighborhood parks:

Conventionally, neighborhood parks or parklike open spaces are considered boons conferred on the deprived populations of cities. Let us turn this thought around, and consider city parks deprived places that need the boon of life and appreciation conferred on *them*. This is more nearly in accord with reality, for people do confer use on parks and make them successes—or else withhold use and doom parks to rejection and failure.

Parks are volatile places. They tend to run to extremes of popularity and unpopularity. Their behavior is far from simple. They can be delightful features of city districts, and economic assets to their surroundings as well, but pitifully few are. They can grow more beloved and valuable with the years, but pitifully few show this staying power. For every Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, or Rockefeller Plaza or Washington Square in New York, or Boston Common, or their loved constituents in other cities, there are dozens of dispirited city vacuums called parks, eaten around with decay, little used, unloved.

The inability of a neighborhood or district to attach itself with affection... to a neighborhood park is due... [to the fact that some] parks are handicapped because of insufficient diversity in their immediate surroundings, and consequent dullness.

The best known of Penn's four squares is Rittenhouse Square, a beloved, successful, much-used park, one of Philadelphia's greatest assets today, the center of a fashionable neighborhood—indeed, the only old neighborhood in Philadelphia which is spontaneously rehabilitating its edges and extending its real estate values.

Certain qualities in design can apparently make a difference too. Parks intensely used in generalized public-yard fashion tend to have four elements in their design which I shall call intricacy, centering, sun, and enclosure. Intricacy that counts is mainly intricacy at eye level, change in the rise of ground, groupings of trees, openings leading to various focal points... Good small parks typically have a place somewhere within them commonly understood to be the center—at the very least a main crossroads and pausing point, a climax. Although buildings should not cut sun from the park—if the object is to encourage full use—the presence of buildings around a park is important in design. They enclose it.

Only experience and trial and error can indicate what diverse combinations of activities can operate effectively as demand goods for any specific park. Swimming, fishing, sports, and carnival or carnival-like activities are demand goods, as are music and plays. The ambiance, the weather, the color and lights, and simple curiosity bring people out.