

OPINION

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Dynamic parks help define who we are, what we value

When our country was young and still trying to distinguish its identity, a new relationship was established between urban development and society. This relationship is defined as the design of parks concerning environmental and social functions. America did not invent the first public park or the concept of park planning, but we did broaden the roles of parks within the development and evolution of a community.

In 1858, a design competition was held for a new public park in New York City. The city wanted to be considered as a great city and also needed to help alleviate the urban stresses of that time.

The winners of the Central Park Competition were Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux.

This project set the standard for future parks and the development of cities.

Olmstead brought into their design intention, from his unique past experiences, important environmental and social issues. Most cities of that era were quite diverse economically and socially, and he wanted his park design to continue the grand experiment of the American "melting pot" with increased opportunities of social engagements. He also wanted to provide an escape from the urban chaos and stress via a reconnection to the natural world.

This integration of city form to these issues is now a fundamental principle of park planning and design.

Northeast Ohio has many admirable examples of parks that are integrated into our unique landscape and our many cultures. We also have Cleveland's "Emerald Necklace" that was officially created in 1917 guided by William Stinchcomb, an engineer. His intent was to establish an outer chain of parks with connecting boulevards back into Cleveland and surrounding areas. This park system has been very successful in defining the physical development of Cuyahoga County. Furthermore, the idea has evolved with the development of the region and has contributed to the creation and progression of neighboring counties with robust parks, trails, and reservation areas.

In Portage County we have a growing park system with new trails and preserved areas being created by the Portage Park District. This has been accomplished with the help of many volunteers, fundraising efforts, and gifts of land from people

GREEN PORTAGE

Charles Frederick
Portage Park District



who understand the value of experiencing the natural world.

The historic influences of parks and open spaces on urban form began a rich tradition of integrated planning and design techniques, but after 1945 our notion of urban forms and communities changed. The growth of the suburbs did not capitalize on many of the past traditions of park planning or provide the necessary connections of open spaces into developed areas. This has resulted in many urban and suburban areas lacking important environmental and social elements.

However, more recently the fundamental notion that parks have environmental and social responsibilities to a community is again a primary park planning and design philosophy.

The Congress of New Urbanism and Smart Growth theory — Ohio has the Balanced Growth Program — have returned to the basics of urban planning and park design, like connections to the community, social integration opportunities, environmental mitigation (stormwater quality, species diversity, and ecosystem management).

Our thoughts on community development are again evolving. Our sense of what defines a city, suburb, or village is in a consistent state of change. Our roots of urban and suburban development have brought us integrated and connected communities, preserved open spaces and ecological management. These traditions and the role of comprehensive park planning are fundamental to the future success of our communities.

Parks matter because they define who we are as a culture and can provide strategic growth opportunities for our communities.

Charles Frederick is an adjunct faculty member at KSU's College of Architecture & Environmental Design and is in private practice focusing on landscape planning and ecological design. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier.