"Relation of Park Planning to City and Regional Planning"

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I think it will be best for me to discuss the relation of Park Planning to City and Regional Planning as a matter of general principles, pointing what I have to say by some references to the Washington situation but not attempting a specific report of that situation as such.

Indeed there are new factors in that situation, both encouraging and otherwise, which would make it hazardous to present clear-cut specific opinions on it without a renewed and thorough study which I have not had opportunity to make. It is my business to form and express such opinions on the basis of an adequate knowledge of all the pertinent facts, and I cannot afford to go off half-cock merely in the hope of offering possibly helpful suggestions such as might come from a well-intentioned amateur.

The planning of a park system, as I conceive it, includes the following major steps. Perhaps it would be better to call them aspects rather than steps, because while in a general way they follow logically in the order in which I shall name them, they are to a great extent continuous processes, which must be carried on concurrently.

ANALYSIS OF PARK NEEDS

First, there is an analysis of the park needs of the present and prospective population to be served. With this goes preliminary analysis of the possible means of meeting each of the needs, and the striking of a reasonable balance as to the extent to which each need should be provided for in view of their respective values and costs and the probable economic limitations on the whole undertaking.

In "park needs" I include all needs for out-door recreation except those which can and will be provided for on private initiative and by private means (individually, commercially, or by clubs and similar organizations), and except those which can and will be provided for by public agencies unconnected with a park system. The former set of exceptions explain themselves sufficiently. Among the latter set may be instanced the popular form of outdoor recreation which consists of riding in automobiles for pleasure amid more or less pleasant surroundings. In so far as this form of recreation is and will be adequately and satisfactorily provided for, as a by-product upon highways created and maintained primarily for purpose of general transportation—and the great bulk of this form of recreation takes place on such highways—it is not necessary to reckon it as a park need. But in so far as it is not or will not be so provided for satisfactorily, it becomes necessary to reckon it as a park need, and to consider the costs and values of roads designed specifically for this purpose in parks and in parkways, and also the costs and values of cooperative undertakings by which general transportation roads can be made, through the use of park funds, more satisfactory for this recreational use; as by securing extra width, by planting and decoration, by modifying routes, by controlling the appearance of their surroundings, and by associating strictly park undertakings therewith.

This is not the place to attempt an enumeration even of the more important park needs. The point I want to make is that the needs should be considered in their entirety, and the facts faced with an open mind, guarding against preconceptions as
to what the real needs are or as to their relative importance and urgency.

The single instance which I gave of the relation between park needs proper and the use of highways for one form of outdoor recreation, will also serve to make clear that while some important forms of outdoor recreation lie exclusively and centrally within the province of a park system to provide—such as the enjoyment by most urban people of intimate contact with large bodies of spacious refreshing natural scenery—there are many others which occupy border-line positions, partly within the legitimate and appropriate field of a park system and partly within other fields.

**SELECTION OF LANDS**

A second step or aspect of park planning is the selection of park lands which, by virtue of their locations, extent, boundaries, physical characteristics, and market value for other than park purposes, are best adapted to serve the particular park purposes chosen for accomplishment, in the best manner and at the least cost. I use cost here not merely to mean first cost of land, but in a broad sense to include cost of interference between the park uses and other desirable or necessary things, and also cost of subsequent park improvement and continuing maintenance and operation as affected by the sites.

It may be well to pause here for the sake of emphasizing what must be tolerably clear to this audience, that both of the above aspects of the intelligent planning of a park system are intimately and inextricably related to general city and regional planning.

The very first item mentioned involves an intelligent forecast of the prospective population to be served; its size, its distribution, its composition, its conditions and habits of life, and its economic status. There are fundamental data applicable to city and regional planning as a whole. With differences of emphasis upon details of one sort or another and differences in the length of forecast which is most important, such data are of basic importance in planning economically and wisely for the distribution of schools and institutions, sewers, water supply, means of transportation, zoning regulations and dozens of other elements of city and regional planning. It is one of the functions of a general planning agency to gather, digest, correct and bring up to date such data and forecasts and help in their interpretation and use as a basis for wise park planning and for all the other purposes. In the absence of such a general planning agency adequately performing its functions, the specialized planning agen-

cies like a park commission or a water board must perform make independent general surveys and forecasts of this nature for themselves—which they generally do with considerable duplication and repetition of effort and often in a deplorably inadequate way.

It is undoubtedly true that it has not been customary in park system planning to fit the plans as precisely in detail to such forecast of population as is practicable and customary in planning investments in a water supply system or a telephone system. And it may not be expedient as an aid to the economical and efficient planning of a park system alone to make so large a proportionate investment (out of the total funds available for the enterprise) in the initial effort to obtain a high degree of assurance concerning the population to be served as has been found by the Bell Telephone Company to be prudent in safeguarding the interests of its investors and subscribers. The painstaking, thorough, deliberate and costly analyses and forecasts of population and its distribution and of the probably location and intensity of needs for telephone service which are made by the telephone companies before planning how and where to invest a few million dollars in telephone plant are certainly in marked contrast with the cheerful self-assurance with which the average park commission will jump to a conclusion after the superficial consideration and will lightly place millions of dollars of the taxpayers’ money on a dark horse.

The difference is in part due to the fact that in government affairs, from the village and the city up to the national stage, there is a greater tendency than in business organizations to fluctuate between the two extremes of a niggardly and short-sighted penuriousness and an easy carelessness in spending large appropriations of other people’s money. But it is also often due to the fact that the directing bodies and those on whom they happen to rely are, with the best of intentions, ignorant of the special technique required for properly solving their problems, sometimes rather contemptuous of “experts” both good and bad, and frequently unable to distinguish between quacks and competent specialists. In the case of water supplies the advantages of leaning on highly trained technical specialists are so obvious and so generally recognized that no large undertaking of that sort is ever undertaken without placing responsibility squarely on such men; and the technique of their art is so highly developed that they never fail to provide themselves with a tolerably thorough basic analysis and forecast of the population to be served and of its predictable needs. But in the absence of a competent and
well financed city planning or regional planning agency, this vital step is very apt to be “fooled” except in the case of water supplies. It is properly a joint service and part of general city planning or regional planning; but it is as much needed for water supply planning, and if it is not otherwise provided park system planners like water supply planners and telephone system planners clearly need to do at least that much of the regional planning job.

Again, there is the question of conflicting purposes and their proper adjustment in the best interest of the whole community. Let us suppose a simple case. Let us suppose that two alternative park sites, A and B, are under consideration. From the point of view of physical fitness for performing the desired park functions effectively and at moderate cost for improvement and maintenance there may be little to choose between them. The same may be true of their general locations in respect to the population to be served. As to cost of land, A may be somewhat cheaper than B. Yet an adequate study of the probable development of other elements of the regional plan might make it plain evident that a conflict would be likely to arise in the future between the use of Site A for park purposes and the performance of other important functions, such as the selection of Site B for the park at a higher first cost would be far wiser for the community.

For example, Site A might prove to contain so much of the best site for an ultimately necessary distributing reservoir that it would cost, say, a million dollars extra to use the next best site for that purpose. And if Site A were used for a park without recognizing that fact, the community might presently be confronted with the alternative of paying that extra million or of placing the reservoir in the park in such a way as to wreck most of the value produced by twenty years of park improvement. Or, for another example, Site A might prove to lie right in the proper path of several important traffic routes, necessitating either serious delay, inconvenience and expense to traffic, or the over-running of the park roads with high speed traffic largely destructive of its proper park values, or both.

As a matter of fact that is substantially what has happened to Central Park, New York. Nearly seventy years ago my father clearly recognized this defect of its situation in a general way, although he did not, of course, forecast the present enormous development in volume and speed of vehicular traffic resulting from the invention of the gasoline engine and the pneumatic tire. He was inclined to deplore the fact that the site had been chosen in substitution for one on the East River which would have been practically free from this conflict and which had certain other advantages besides. He had to accept what had been chosen and as designer he made the best provision he could devise for minimizing the inevitable conflict so far as he could foresee its nature, by introducing the sunken transverse traffic roads isolated from the park uses and the park landscapes. Today the rising traffic tide pours through all the roads of Central Park, to the risk of life and limb and to the immense impairment of that peaceful, restful enjoyment of the park by millions of people which is the main justification for the millions of dollars which it has cost. I am not concerned here, of course, with the problem of how New York can now most wisely cope with this situation.

I have said enough in these few instances to make clear that planning and creating a park system, at least as regards the two aspects of that planning which I have mentioned, namely, first, the analysis of requirements and forecast of conditions and second, the choice of sites, is essentially a part of City or Regional Planning for the area in which the Park System is situated; and that, in the absence of an efficient agency properly devoted to such general planning, which can and will cooperate with the special park planning agency by furnishing data and advice and by correlating other elements of the general plan which the park plans, those who are responsible for crystallizing the park system plans into facts must themselves take up, as a work of supererogation, a considerable part of the burden which belongs to such a general planning agency, if they are to gain for the community a proper return for the total sum of the taxpayers’ money which they spend. They differ in this respect only in degree from those responsible for the determination of such other comprehensive elements of the city or regional plan as a water supply system, a sewer system, a highway system or a telephone system. They do differ in degree from these because of the fact not only that a park system is wide-flung and comprehensive but that many of its units are very large and that conflict between them and other purposes after the parks are fixed is peculiarly difficult to adjust by minor modifications of detail without very serious losses of value.

Taking the Washington situation as a case, I believe that in view of the close regional interlocking of many serious problems of urban and suburban growth as between the District of Columbia and adjacent portions of Maryland and Virginia, in view of the exceptional jurisdictional difficulties in the way of effective regional planning for this region, and in view of the fact that the newly-created Park Commission appears to be about the only agency that has any shadow of jurisdictional concern with
the region as a whole, it would be a serious mistake for that Commission not to give very serious preliminary study to several broad aspects of regional planning for the entire social and economic unit of which Washington is the urban center—aspects which are inextricably related to park system planning even though not in any strict sense a part of park system planning as such. At the same time I want to make it perfectly clear that I do not consider a park commission, charged as it must be with executive responsibilities of a specialized sort, to be a desirable or suitable permanent agency for carrying on the functions of city or regional planning as a whole.

The objections to such a doubling up of duties are the same in kind, if not in degree, as would apply to the assignment of general city or regional planning functions to a specialized executive agency in charge of a sewer system, a water supply system, a street system, a traction system, or any other special element of the city or regional plan. The objections are two-fold.

In the first place, the point of view is apt to be biased in dealing with the problem of making adjustments and accommodations as between plans for what the agency expects to carry through to completion as its own executive job, and plans for other things which may be just as important for the community but which some other fellows will have to do. In the second place, any executive agency in charge of the creation, maintenance and operation of large public works of any kind, is under such a constant pressure from the immediate executive details of its work that it is very difficult for it to give profound and continuous attention to the broader aspects of comprehensive long-range planning. Too often it cannot see the woods for the trees. A general planning agency without special executive functions is proved with a salutary check upon the natural human tendency to become absorbed in detail, by the fact that the detailed planning of most of the elements of a general city or regional plan is already assigned to other agencies, special or local, which properly resist excessive encroachment on their special fields and tend to make the general planning agency stick to its proper job of collecting and digesting the general basic data, of making the long range forecasts, of making sure that the main big elements of the general plan are provided for, and of securing reasonable coordination between the plans for diverse special elements.

DETERMINING PARK BENEFITS

Finally, to bring this point home, I will mention a third main step or aspect of park system planning, in the course of which we clearly pass beyond the region of the overlap that was so apparent, in the first two steps, between park system planning and general city or regional planning. As far as that overlap region extends, park planning is not only park planning but is also a part of city and regional planning; beyond that point it is detailed park planning, pure and simple, and city planners as such should keep their fingers out of it and stick to their own business.

This third aspect of park system planning consists of determining first in the large and ultimately in the minutest detail, just what physical operations in the way of construction, planting, maintenance, and executive management, applied to each parcel of land selected for park purposes, will give the best park result to the public served, having due regard to total annual cost and the several needs to be served.

There is probably no municipal department which embraces a wider diversity of purposes to be served or calls for a wider range of technical skill for serving those purposes efficiently and well than in the case of a park system. There are probably none, except highways and perhaps schools, which involve so large a capital investment. The productive value of this investment is largely determined by the skill and wisdom applied to the innumerable determinations of details, often petty in themselves, which year in and year out go to make up this third aspect of park system planning. Comparing the value received, in quality and quantity of public recreation of all sorts per million dollars invested, which are obtained in those cases where this aspect of park system planning is relatively well handled, with the mediocre values which are in fact obtained in many cases, it is amazing to find what a small percentage on the total capital invested is ordinarily applied to obtaining a really high grade staff.

In no private business are the decisions which mainly determine the value of the returns on millions of dollars of invested capital so largely made by employees of low earning power or at the occasional meetings of an intelligent but amateurish board of directors with no other guidance than they happen to receive from such low-paid subordinates.

To sum up. The relation of City and Regional Planning to the Capital Park System, as to every other park system which is to be worthy of the name, lies mainly in the fact that the first two steps or aspects of park system planning when wisely and skillfully done are, at the same time and to an equal degree, parts of City or Regional Planning; and are dependent for their excellence to a considerable degree upon other parts of city or regional planning, whether these parts are adequately supplied by a properly constituted and financed general-planning agency or are supplied as well as circumstances permit by the special park planning agency for itself and at the expense of the park funds. And in a rapidly diminishing degree the same is true of portions of the third aspect of park system planning. But merely because Park System Planning and City or Regional Planning overlap and interlock is no reason for confusing them or attempting to consolidate them.