

# The Spectacle Park

## Emergence of a Sixth Urban Park Typology

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In May of 2004, Blair Kamin, the Pulitzer Prize winning architectural critic, published an article in *Architectural Record* entitled “Will Chicago’s long-awaited Millennium Park be fine art or spectacle? Perhaps a little of both” (61). There are many examples to suggest that the question he posed towards Chicago’s \$470 million addition could as easily have been directed at many other urban public parks that opened during the last decade in the United States (Lindke 35). Evidence suggests that a new park typology has recently emerged that responds to both a contemporary public whose expectations and engagement with open space has dramatically changed over the past century, as well as to the adaptation of cities to a new post-industrial reality. The following article challenges Galen Cranz and Michael Boland’s assertion that five urban park typologies presently exist by suggesting that a sixth model for urban parks, termed here the Spectacle Park, should also be considered. This new park typology will be defined through the examination of two cities, Chicago and Seattle, which retain prominent examples of early twentieth century urban public park design that can be compared to contemporary parks representative of the sixth model.

### A New Type of Urban Park

In “Defining the Sustainable Park: A Fifth Model for Urban Parks,” Cranz and Boland outline five types of public park design predominant within the United States from 1850 to 2004. These are described as the Pleasure Ground (1850-1900), the Reform Park (1900-1930), the Recreation Facility (1930-1965), the Open Space System (1965-?), and the Sustainable Park (1990-present) (Cranz and Boland 103). This essay examines parks classified by the Pleasure Ground typology to provide a comparative method for understanding how society’s perceptions of public open space have evolved to dramatically alter the design of public parks from the cultivated, pastoral landscapes of a century ago to today’s highly programmed and entertaining environments. Pleasure Ground Parks arguably remain the most iconic and admired form of American park design, as evidenced by the continued preservation of such prominent examples as Central Park, Garfield Park, and Boston Commons. Therefore, it is appropriate to contrast the most enduring model of

park design, the Pleasure Ground, against the emerging Spectacle Park.

Spectacle is defined as “something exhibited to view as unusual, notable, or entertaining; especially: an eye-catching or dramatic public display” (Merriam-Webster). It represents the most appropriate way to describe the emerging sixth urban park typology. Since the mid-1990s, many prominent urban public parks have emerged, each demonstrating such an elevated level of entertainment and self-consciousness that none of Cranz and Boland’s existing five park typologies comfortably apply.

The Spectacle Park represents a distinct category because of its embrace of provocative art installations, highly programmed spaces, rigid circulation patterns, a superficial relationship to nature, stimulation that is

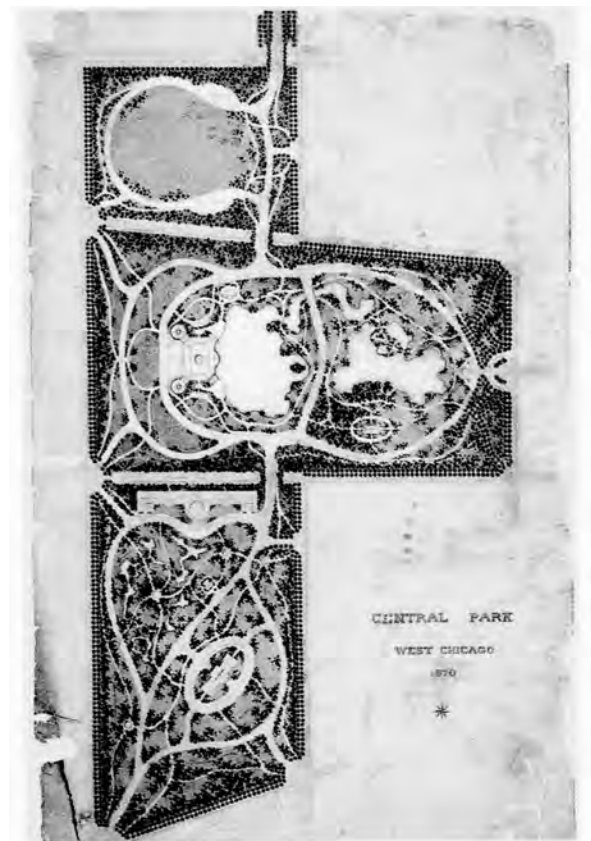


Figure A: Original site plan for Garfield Park (then called Central Park) by William Le Baron Jenney

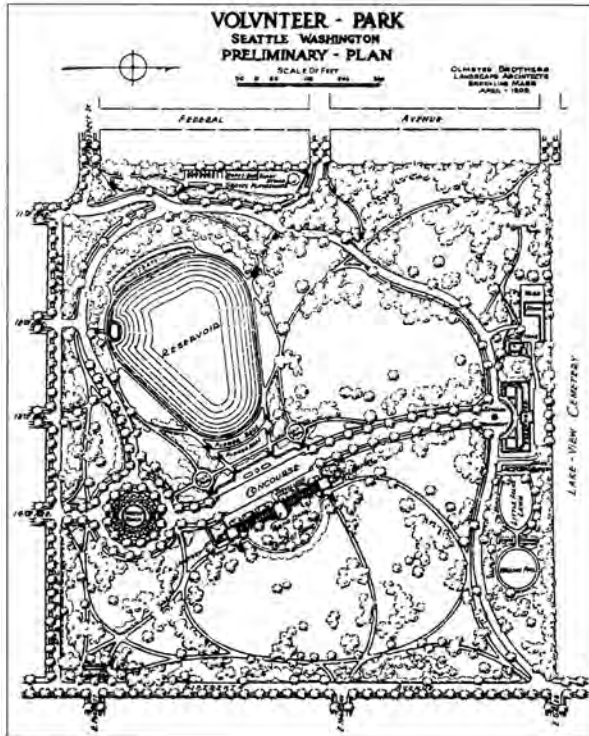


Figure B: Original site plan for Volunteer Park by the Olmsted Brothers

constant during day and night and throughout changing seasons, and complex public-private funding arrangements. In a majority of cases, Spectacle Parks provide a jolt of adrenaline to cities, boosting tourism and urban revitalization. Mary Eysenbach, Director of the City Parks Forum at the American Planning Association, observed: “just like Central Park defines an area of Manhattan, Millennium Park is creating an identity for [Chicago’s] downtown” (Vaira 168).

The hyper-stimulated character typical of Spectacle Parks is the outcome of an American public that engages urban parks much differently than at the turn of the 20th century. Repeated engagement with parkland is less common because Americans have less time for recreation, but more ways to spend their free time. Parks now compete with increases in travel opportunities, organized sporting events, and the ubiquitous consumption of consumer electronics for the public’s limited leisure time. In addition, the rise of suburban sprawl typically defined by large single-family lots has reduced population in urban centers and made repeated contact with nature seem less important. This can be attributed to the prevalence of low-density suburban residential housing with large back yards that reduces the need for families to seek parkland for play space for children, pet owners to visit public parks with their four-legged companions, and people to utilize these open spaces for group cookouts and gatherings.

As Ray Oldenburg suggests in his book *The Great Good Place*, “A two-stop model [work and home] of daily routine is becoming fixed in our habits as the urban environment affords less opportunity for public relaxation” (9). As a result of these changing dynamics, new public parks are no longer regarded as serving as an antidote to urban life as they were during the Pleasure Ground period. Rather, their design characteristics seek to brand the parks in order to encourage attendance and generate both national and international media attention for the respective city. The role of the urban public park has changed to necessitate experiences that provoke a response, engage the senses, provide multiple choices for stimulation, and, most importantly, entertain. The Spectacle Park exists as a destination park for entertainment rather than a respite for repeated psychological reflection within the landscape.

### Pleasure Ground: An Enduring Urban Park Typology

Near the turn of the twentieth century, Chicago and Seattle served as prominent settings for exploring the expanding role and formation of public open space. Noted landscape architects and designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted, the Olmsted Brothers, and William Le Baron Jenney were each influential in defining the size, location, spatial characteristics, and function of parks in one or both of these two cities. In both cases, formal public open space was the result of great prosperity and recognition by civic leaders that public parks were needed to relieve the stresses of urban life. Garfield Park, in Chicago, (then called Central Park), and Volunteer Park, in Seattle, are both representative models of the Pleasure Ground park typology. Each resulted from civic initiatives intended to enhance public life and to generate greater prominence for each city on the national and international stages.

Garfield Park and Volunteer Park reflect very similar development characteristics. Both were constructed on greenfield sites near the edges of urban expansion. This was likely because civic leaders adhered to contemporary design trends related to the Parks Movement and existing relationships between the parks’ designers. For example, William Le Baron Jenney completed a plan for Garfield Park [Figure A] in 1870 after Chicago’s West Park Commissioners determined that they could not afford to hire the renowned firm of Olmsted & Vaux (Bachrach and Nathan 8). However, Jenney had previously worked at Olmsted & Vaux on their design for Riverside, an early suburb of Chicago. Thus, Jenney’s plan for Garfield Park exhibits the same Pleasure Ground design aesthetic popularized by Frederick Law Olmsted. Only forty acres of the proposed 185-acre site was originally constructed in the 1880s (Bachrach and Nathan 9). By the mid-1930s, the remaining 145 acres of parkland were finally completed,

though with some modifications to the original master plan.

Volunteer Park in Seattle is also a representative example of the Pleasure Ground park typology [Figure B]. Although the site became parkland in 1887, it was not until 1909 that it acquired its enduring Pleasure Ground characteristics. It was at this time that the Olmsted Brothers completed a plan for the 48-acre site (Seattle Parks and Recreation). Led by John Charles Olmsted, the design embraces many of the planning and design principles that his father established. In *Greenscapes: Olmsted's Pacific Northwest*, Joan Hockaday notes that "the city and the Olmsted Brothers maintained a constant vision from start to finish during the site's early years. The park remains today as one of Seattle's best examples of early 20th century professional landscape planning and design" (47).

### **Spectacle Park: An Emerging Urban Park Typology**

At the onset of the 21st century, Chicago and Seattle once again served as prominent settings for innovations surrounding the role and form of contemporary parks. In 2004 and 2007, respectively, Millennium Park opened in Chicago and Olympic Sculpture Park opened in Seattle. Advocates hoped these public parks would remedy center-city blight and serve as catalysts for urban revitalization efforts. In both cases, designers were encouraged to prepare ambitious creative designs to garner national and international recognition.



Figure C: Aerial view of Olympic Sculpture Park

The designers for each park responded by creating provocative designs that challenged the conventions of urban public park aesthetics. As a result, these parks are different from any others already existing within either city or around the globe. Chicago and Seattle have established a new definition for the role and form of urban public parks in cities. As has been noted in the case of Seattle, "the extraordinary intersection of art and urban design at the Olympic Sculpture Park offers a new model for the relationship between art and architecture" (Leers 61).

Millennium Park encompasses 24.5 acres of some of the most compelling real estate within the city. Situated between the Art Institute of Chicago, Michigan Avenue, and Grant Park, it maintains stunning views towards the Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan (Freeman 95). The 8.5-acre Olympic Sculpture Park is very similar in this regard, due to its position in the center of Seattle's downtown with views towards Elliott Bay, Puget Sound, and the Seattle skyline (Manfredi and Weiss, 11). The two parks are not only similarly situated, but both designs responded to the challenge posed by their respective cities to reclaim derelict post-industrial downtown land for public benefit. Millennium Park was constructed over a sunken rail yard and parking garage; Olympic Sculpture Park was built upon an abandoned industrial site with below-grade existing railroad infrastructure that required preservation. The challenges associated with each of these two park projects are representative of the typical obstacles facing parks classified by the sixth urban park model. Whereas parks such as Garfield Park and Volunteer Park were constructed on peripheral urban greenfields, Spectacle Parks are typically built on center-city brownfield sites. Thus, the Spectacle Park often serves a significant environmental role by greening former industrial lands, and can serve to energize a previously neglected urban district-- not just the recreational and urban development goals of the previous century's Pleasure Grounds.

Given the tendency for Spectacle Parks to be located on degraded sites within an urban core, their size is typically a fraction of the acreage historically found within Pleasure Grounds. However, the comparatively small park size does not appear to reduce the number of programmatic elements within each space. Olympic Sculpture Park integrates an 18,000 sq. ft. Seattle Art Museum pavilion, numerous outdoor sculptures by celebrated artists, an amphitheater, a water feature, connection to the Elliott Bay shoreline, and diverse ecological environments, all while retaining existing highway and rail infrastructure on the site. [Figure C] In contrast, the Olmsted Brothers' plan for Volunteer Park provided a similar number of features, but spread throughout a 48-acre landscape. The included chart demonstrates the contrast between size and amenities within the parks outlined in this article. [Figure D] This highlights that programmatic expectations for



Figure E: Aerial view of Millennium Park demonstrating the numerous options for entertainment

Spectacle Parks greatly exceed those historically found within the Pleasure Ground typology, when size is taken into consideration.

This tendency is only further reinforced when one compares the plan for Millennium Park against the plan for Garfield Park. While the size of Millennium Park is double that of Olympic Sculpture Park; the programmatic elements located within this Spectacle Park are similar, yet double or triple in size. The design for Millennium Park is divided into a series of outdoor rooms that each features different programmatic content. Millennium Park boasts multiple provocative sculptural pieces by renowned artists such as Anish Kapoor and Jaume Plensa, a Frank Gehry-designed amphitheater, a restaurant, café, and numerous other amenities all constructed atop the existing railroad infrastructure and expanded public parking. [Figure E] The park also provides connectivity via sculptural bridges to both Lake Michigan and the Art Institute of Chicago. Characteristic of Spectacle Parks, Millennium Park has been designed to acknowledge the changing seasons and times of use through incorporation of an area for outdoor ice skating and an evocative lighting scheme. The Spectacle Park tries to appeal to people from all age groups, including teenagers and twenty-somethings typically forgotten in urban park design, through an extensive array of programmatic options. In contrast, William Le Baron Jenney's 1870 plan for the 185-acre Garfield Park focused on older adults with children and the elderly by proposing family-oriented passive park

amenities. However, the Spectacle Park's influence may be extending to Pleasure Grounds, as evidenced by Garfield Park's recent exhibition of art created by the renowned sculptor Niki de Saint Phalle that attracted visitors from a wide age range.

Pleasure Ground parks were typically designed with multiple circulation options to promote leisurely exploration in vast park settings; whereas Spectacle Parks provide more limited circulation, at a smaller scale, directed toward specific attractions. In the design of both Volunteer Park and Garfield Park, the programmatic elements are dispersed throughout expansive sites and set amongst natural vegetation. Both Pleasure Ground Parks discussed in this article have a curvilinear path system that the designers used to create prominent views and provide a sense of enclosure. The Spectacle Parks leave much less to the imagination of visitors, as a consequence of their comparatively small land area. Techniques including elevation changes and landscape screening are used in both parks to create an element of surprise. However, the density of programmatic elements found in Spectacle Parks necessarily limits freedom to explore. Neither Millennium Park nor Olympic Sculpture Park provides the same sense of enclosure or potential for aimless wandering that is found within Volunteer Park or Garfield Park. This compression makes park visitors as much a part of the spectacle as the programmatic elements themselves. The sculptural art fountain by Jaume Plensa, located in Millennium Park, provides a fitting example of this situation. On any warm Chicago day, park visitors can be seen lingering on the walls adjacent to the fountain to watch the dozens of children and occasional adults interacting with the contemporary water display. [Figure F]

## Conclusion

While the design of Spectacle Parks such as Millennium Park and Olympic Sculpture Park are arguably elegant and have garnered much attention within the international design community; time will prove the true test of their success at responding to America's changing engagement with its urban public parks. In the case of

Characteristics	Garfield Park	Volunteer Park	Millennium Park	Olympic Sculpture Park
Size	185 acres	48 acres	24.5 acres	8.5 acres
Site	greenfield	greenfield	brownfield	brownfield
Amenities	two artificial lakes, bandstand, rustic playhouse, monumental tower, zoo, pastoral meadow, extensive trail system	greenhouse, bandstand, playground, two water fountains, lawn areas, water tower, formal gardens, extensive path system	amphitheater, art sculptures, water fountain, water feature, café, restaurant, 3-acre garden of native prairie plants, formal gardens, bike station, ice rink, access to both Lake Michigan and the Art Institute of Chicago	Seattle Art Museum pavilion, café, numerous art sculptures, amphitheater, water feature, open lawn areas, public pathway to Elliot Bay, diverse ecological environments: temperate evergreen forest, deciduous forest of Quaking Aspens, and a tidal garden

Figure D: Chart contrasting size and amenities of parks

Olympic Sculpture Park, “its success as a public space will depend above all on its ability to eventually become a common, almost anonymous space - an urban path that we mostly take for granted” (Zardini 49). Both parks can only hope that they will be embraced as fully by city residents and tourists alike to ensure their preservation well into the future, as have parks such as Central Park and Boston Commons. Their transformative impact on their respective urban centers suggests that they may have begun to garner the necessary admiration. As hoped for by early park advocates, both Millennium Park and Olympic Sculpture Park have successfully served as catalysts to jumpstart revitalization efforts in the urban areas that surround them. This presents a strong argument for Spectacle Parks to serve as a new model for the adaptation of abandoned industrial urban landscapes into venues for public benefit. The transformation of blighted post-industrial sites, commonly found along waterfronts, into verdant, engaging park spaces has the potential to position cities for a more prosperous future as has been demonstrated in both Chicago and Seattle.

This aspect, in combination with evidence presented above, highlights the unique characteristics present within the Spectacle Park and identifies why parks such as Millennium Park and Olympic Sculpture Park warrant a new typological classification. Spectacle Parks respond to an American public that no longer seeks respite in urban public parks, but rather views these spaces as venues for entertainment. The admiration and attention that Spectacle Parks have already garnered over their short life spans suggests that they have the potential to make a lasting impact upon the urban environment. However, the question remains whether this sixth urban park typology is as enduring as the Pleasure Ground typology or merely a trend that only lasts for another decade or two.

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Figure F – View of Jaume Plensa’s Crown Fountain

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Figure B: Hockaday, Joan. *Greenscapes: Olmsted’s Pacific Northwest*. Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press, 2009.

Figure C: ASLA 2007 Professional Awards, <http://www.asla.org/>

Figure E: Greenroofs.org. <http://www.greenroofs.org/washington/index.php?page=millennium>

Figure F: Serge Melki, <http://www.flickr.com>