THE PARK INTERNATIONAL:
PARK SYSTEM PLANNING AS AN INTERNATIONAL
PHENOMENON AT THE BEGINNING OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Looking at the metro map of Washington, DC in 2005, a knot of thick blue, orange, yellow, red, and green lines catches the eye, with the lines disentangling themselves toward the edges of the map and running for different lengths in different directions until they suddenly terminate. The Potomac and the Anacostia, the rivers on which the U.S. capital was built beginning in 1792, offered the metro map’s designers suitable natural features to place the viewer on the map, providing graphic signs for the necessary quick orientation amid the jungle of colored metro lines. A second glance at the metro map, however, reveals that not only the abstract blue depictions of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers structure the map and provide the required orientation: A light shade of green underlies the map in certain areas. This represents the capital’s green centerpiece, the Mall; Roosevelt Island (formerly Analostan Island) in the Potomac; the extensive Rock Creek Park running through the city from north to south; Arlington Cemetery; and the green open space along the Potomac. These areas are elements of the national capital’s park system that was planned, developed, and partially realized beginning in 1900. The inclusion of the most extensive and prominent features of Washington’s park system in the metro map and their use as abstract graphic symbols by the map’s designers reflect the important role green open space and the park system have played for the capital’s urban development and its representation after 1900.

After some early forerunners, municipal and metropolitan park system planning as a component of city planning became relevant on both sides of the Atlantic on a broader scale in the early 1900s. It strove to alleviate social ills, enhance citizens’ well-being, increase the value of land in certain areas, and act as a means for municipal and national representation. Park systems perpetuated the social, moral, hygienic, and representational aims that underlay the creation of the first public urban parks on broader municipal and metropolitan scales.

Urban historians have in the last decades pointed to the park system as one of the pioneering urban design works accomplished in the United States, and have referred to it as one of the greatest contributions to city planning.
planning in the United States. In 1966, George F. Chadwick found the “idea of the planning of complete systems of parks and parkways” responsible for the subsequent development of “the idea of comprehensive planning of cities and their environs [as in Washington].” Likewise, the international milieu of city and town planning in the first decade of the twentieth century, also characterized as the “Urban International,” has in the last decades attracted further research.

However, although several scholars have drawn attention to park system planning as an American phenomenon that attracted attention in Europe, and while some have acknowledged the importance of green open space in city planning history, no study exists that deals with the “Park International,” or more specifically, with park system planning as an international phenomenon. The scope of this project therefore is to investigate the points of contact, the cultural transfer and exchange of ideas concerned with modern park system planning and design in the United States and Western Europe from its inception in the United States after the Civil War in the late 1860s until 1930.

Whereas the last three decades of the nineteenth century in the United States can be considered as the time period when landscape architects such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (1822–1903), Horace William Shaler Cleveland (1814–1900), and George Edward Kessler (1862–1923) pioneered the first park systems, the three decades after the turn of the century marked the park system’s establishment as one of the key elements in comprehensive city planning. Park system planning became one of the major preoccupations in North American cities. In 1909, foreseeing large population growth, Oklahoma City for example planned a twenty-eight-mile-long and two-hundred-foot-wide boulevard encircling the city and combining private parks and pleasure grounds. Park systems also played a major role in the city plans drawn up in the first decade of the twentieth century for the nation’s capital and for Chicago, at the time one of the fastest-growing cities.

The period spanning the years from 1900 to 1930 is regarded as the birth of modern city planning in the United States. In terms of American public park development, it has been described as the “reform park era,” and more recently as the “rationalistic era” because of park planners’ emphasis on the hygienic and social functions of parks. It is also the time period when an increasing number of national and international conferences and exhibitions on city planning and landscape architecture took place on both sides of the Atlantic, attracting an increasing number of professionals in these fields and providing manifold opportunities for the diffusion and transatlantic transfer of ideas.

This project is concerned with providing insights into the mechanisms underlying the cross-national transfer of planning and design
ideas. While focusing on the park system, the study seeks to reveal the international impact of individual planning and design solutions. To what extent did the evolution of the park system on both sides of the Atlantic trigger or promote international relations and cause a transatlantic, cross-cultural transfer of ideas on a broader scale in the planning professions?

One of the first park systems to gain international recognition was Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s plan for Buffalo (1868–69), which won an honorable mention at the Paris Exposition of 1878. It is very likely that Olmsted and his followers such as George Edward Kessler, who designed a park system for Kansas City in 1893, were influenced by the design of open space systems along ringroads and on the grounds of fortifications, as was the practice in many European cities at the time. Olmsted had traveled widely in Europe, and Kessler had trained as a gardener in Weimar and Potsdam, where he was probably exposed to the new accomplishments in open-space planning. In 1911, the city planner and advocate of the American City Beautiful movement, Charles Mulford Robinson (1869–1917), pointed to the European example of tree-lined ringroads and public green open space along the ruins of former fortifications for the development of the system of parks and boulevards in Chicago and Boston.10

The European idea of reutilizing the grounds of former fortifications as tree-lined ringroads or green open space was adopted in Washington, DC’s park system plan at the beginning of the twentieth century. Originally drawn up by the Senate Park Commission in 1901–1902 to celebrate the national capital’s centenary with a design that was to act as an example to the nation, the park system was further developed on the metropolitan scale during the first decades of the twentieth century. Washington’s planners suggested securing and linking the open spaces of the old Civil War forts surrounding the city by constructing thirty miles of parkways.11 The so-called McMillan Plan for Washington was followed by an elaborate municipal and metropolitan park system plan in Chicago.

In 1903, the Special Park Commission, formerly a playground-planning group, was instructed by the Chicago city council to develop a park scheme for the metropolitan area. The architect Dwight Heald Perkins (1867–1941) and the landscape architect Jens Jensen (1860–1951) planned eighty-four new parks comprising thirty-seven thousand acres in four zones. Daniel H. Burnham (1846–1912) and Edward Bennett’s (1874–1954) Chicago Plan, which included the municipal and metropolitan park system, in 1909 proposed to turn “grubby commercial Chicago into Parisian Boulevards and Venetian lagoons.”12

The recognition of the park systems’ functions gained momentum with the maturation of the City Beautiful movement in the first decade of
the twentieth century. The idea of connecting parkways and boulevards linking all of a city’s principal parks and points of interest corresponded to the movement’s aim to combine utility and beauty in city development, and was therefore promoted. In 1911, Charles Mulford Robinson asserted that “parks and park systems are the most important artistic work which has been done in the United States.”

At the beginning of the twentieth century, North American and European contemporaries acknowledged the value of the park systems. Among the progressive ideas for urban planning that crossed the Atlantic between the United States and Europe, the park system was considered to have originated in the United States. As Charles Mulford Robinson commented in 1911, “[surveying] the whole range of park activity, it becomes clear that as far as the interest of the study goes American cities are in advance of those in Europe.” Robinson praised American comprehensive city planning schemes, which included park systems as “a seemingly natural part of its [the city’s] organism” rather than letting “the park which has been bestowed upon the city as an after-thought [...]” remain “a separate entity.” In 1917, the garden director of the city of Hanover, Hermann Kube (1866–1944), acknowledged that German park planning was far from being able to compete with the “gigantic park systems of North American cities.” Chicago’s park system was one of the most frequently quoted examples in German garden architectural journals. German architects, city planners, and landscape architects traveled to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, looking for new ideas and planning solutions. Among them were Werner Hegemann (1881–1936) and Hugo Koch (1883–1964), who after their return presented some of their newly gained experiences to the German public in exhibitions and publications. Having experienced American parks and park systems and their strong interrelation with the urban fabric, Hugo Koch in 1928 expressed his belief that “the city once opposed to nature would become the birth place of the ‘new garden.’”

American planning efforts attracted the attention of European planners because of the Americans’ structured, systematic, and comprehensive approach in which the planning of parks and park systems was considered a means to promote the civilization of cities. Already in 1879, after having visited the United States, the French landscape architect Édouard André (1840–1911) expressed his fascination with American town planning, public urban parks, parkways, and cemetery design in his book *L’art des jardins: Traité générale de la composition des parcs et jardins.* Almost thirty years later, in 1905, his colleague, the landscape architect and city planner Jean Claude Nicolas Forestier (1861–1930), wrote a monograph on park system planning, *Grande ville et systèmes de parcs,* published in 1906. Acquainted with the members of the Senate Park
Commission from Washington, DC, whom he had met during their European study tour in Paris in 1901, and well informed through international publications, Forestier presented the most recent American accomplishments in the field. Besides presenting the park systems of Adelaide, Letchworth, Vienna, Cologne, London, and Paris, Forestier focused on the realization of park systems in Boston, New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and Harrisburg. He observed that European cities such as Barcelona, Cologne, Vienna, and London were imitating American examples and improving as well as adding to their existing systems. Ahead of his time, he propagated park system planning on a regional scale, and argued that park system planning could also become a national or even international program, involving neighboring nations and thereby crossing political borders. He also anticipated the idea that parks and park projects should be the object of a general plan for various cities, municipalities, and regions so that open space and parks would be uniformly distributed.

Although most ideas and the impetus for park system planning came from the United States, England, Germany, Austria, and France, park systems were also implemented in southern Europe. In 1914, the English landscape architect Thomas H. Mawson (1861–1933) was invited by Greece’s King Constantine to advise the municipality of Athens on the creation of a park system and other improvements. Mawson had gained prominence not only as a landscape architect and planner in his home country, but also internationally, through a lecture tour in the United States in 1910, subsequent lecture tours to all the major cities in Canada between 1911 and 1913, and the success of his first book, *The Art and Craft of Garden Making* (1900). Citing Forestier in text and image, Nicodemo Severi, the director of parks and gardens in Rome, in 1909 promoted the idea of the park system for its hygienic as well as aesthetic qualities. Echoing the tendencies in the United States and other European countries at the time, Severi in 1921 finally published and ardently promoted suggestions for a municipal and metropolitan *sistema di parchi* in Rome. A few years earlier, in 1916, Marcello Piacentini (1881–1960), later to become Benito Mussolini’s state architect, had proposed a park system as a structuring element for modern Rome. After his return from a journey to the United States on the occasion of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915, a trip during which he also visited New York, Buffalo, Chicago, Washington, and Boston, Piacentini presented a park system plan for the city of Rome. Rome was to be surrounded by a greenbelt (*l’anello dei parchi*) that incorporated the remaining villas, thereby providing for their protection and conservation. Piacentini referred to Chicago’s South Park system as a model. To explain his park system plan, he employed a direct translation of the metaphor commonly
used for Boston’s metropolitan park system, the “emerald necklace.” A
tree-lined avenue was supposed to act as a connector between the indi-
vidual gardens and parks, “like the string of a necklace of precious
stones.” In order to convey the impression of a linear park, only small
villas were to be built on the land adjacent to the tree-lined avenue.\textsuperscript{31}

While Europeans looked toward America and tried to learn from
American park system planning, American planners and landscape ar-
chitects joined the already established forums in Europe and traveled the
continent, visiting gardens, parks, and cities, and subsequently introduc-
ing into their own country design ideas and planning tools such as zoning
laws that they had picked up in Europe. Accordingly, the journal \textit{The
American City} announced in its first issue that it would be providing its
readers with abstracts and translations of articles from European maga-
zines so that “by studying their [the Europeans’] methods and achieve-
ments we may avoid some of their mistakes and be guided by their
successes [. . .].”\textsuperscript{32} In 1909, the president emeritus of Harvard University,
Charles William Eliot, stated that “democratic America is far behind Eu-
rope in providing effectively for the health and happiness of the urban
part of the population.”\textsuperscript{33}

In fact, Americans admired what was thought to be “true democracy”
in the European parks and the social services they provided.\textsuperscript{34} Returning
from a study trip in Europe, the American landscape architect George
Elberton Burnap admired the numerous “milk houses” he found, espe-
cially in German and Austrian public parks. There, glasses of milk were
sold for a relatively low price so that many people could afford this
healthy refreshment. In his treatise on park design published in 1916,
Burnap promoted the idea of milk houses in the United States, where at
the time only five milk stations in New York’s Central Park were known
to him.\textsuperscript{35} The \textit{Christian Science Monitor} emphasized the democratic values
that were endorsed in Madrid’s Retiro Park. Like the library in the Italian
Parco del Valentino in Turin, which let park visitors take its books into
the park, the Madrilene municipality was reported to provide a case of
books, “one of which any person may take to read while in the park, a
notice at the stand placing him on his honor, for the common weal, to
return it before he leaves.”\textsuperscript{36}

Besides experiencing public parks as a means of creating a more
democratic social order in countries characterized by autocratic govern-
ments and stratified societies, American landscape architects sought to
learn from Europe’s classical design tradition. Its adaptation, which
gradually spread from the East Coast westward in the thirty years from
1890 on, caused American landscape architects to spend as much time as
possible on study trips in Europe. Although these architects applied clas-
sical Italian and French designs especially to privately owned country
estates, they also employed classical features in the design of public open space. Urban parks such as Meridian Hill Park in Washington, DC, Grant Park in Chicago, the Paseo in Kansas City, Missouri, and the open grounds of the Civic Center in Denver, all conceived as individual parts of an extensive park system, still reveal the borrowed Italian and French classicism today.

Research into the international exchange in open space and park system planning also requires an investigation of the park system planners themselves. What role did landscape architects, architects, city planners, and engineers play on both sides of the Atlantic? As the architect and planner George B. Ford noted in 1916, “the working out of an adequate system of parks and boulevards, playgrounds and playfields, is a civic enterprise that architects and landscape architects are peculiarly fitted to inspire and to lead.”37 Whereas city planning in Europe was at the time mainly done by architects and engineers, in the United States, landscape architects were largely involved in the planned development of cities. A German observer commented in 1930: “A superficial glance at American city planning already is enough to surprise one by the outstanding role landscape architecture plays in it.”38 It is, in fact, emblematic that John Nolen (1869–1937), trained in landscape architecture after an early career as professor of adult education at the University of Pennsylvania, should become one of the leading figures in American city planning at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The articles in Landscape Architecture, the official journal of the American Society of Landscape Architects, reveal a steadily increasing attention to the subject of city planning from the journal’s founding in 1910 until 1925, when the quarterly journal City Planning was established as the official organ of the American City Planning Institute and the National Conference on City Planning. Instruction in city planning was first offered within divisions of landscape architecture, landscape design, and horticulture, with a few offerings from departments of civil engineering.39 In his book on park design and park planning published in 1916, the landscape architect for the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds in Washington, George Elberton Burnap (1885–1938), recommended “a simultaneous advancement of city planning and park building.”40 It was only a logical consequence that landscape architects were to be on the forefront in the early city planning movement in the U.S.

The aspects mentioned so far treat the park system as a city planning concept with certain functions, namely to provide all citizens with a healthy and beautiful urban environment for recreation and to increase the value of adjacent tracts of land. However, the park system is also a conceptualized idea: it expresses and symbolizes a specific set of cultural, social, and political values and ideologies. It is one of the key elements
which after the Civil War and into the twentieth century redefined urban form and acted as an “institution[s] of social reform.” This project therefore also explores the park system’s theoretical, cultural, and social origins. What role did Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romantic, and anti-Romantic thought play in the development of the park system? What ideas of nature and city underlie its concept? For example, two ideas that date back to antiquity were re-enlivened by park system planners in the United States: *rus in urbe* and the *dulce utili*.

On a citywide scale, the park system was to connect the city with the countryside and provide the citizens with a naturalistic landscape, with *rus in urbe*. In contrast to the *rus in urbe* of Roman times described by the poets Martialis and Horace, when only the aristocracy was able to afford the advantages of urban and country life simultaneously, in late-nineteenth-century America, *rus in urbe* was assigned democratic, social values. The creation of a moral cityscape, one of the goals of the city beautiful movement, implied the upgrading of the urban environment through parks, playgrounds, “modern civic art” and the “parking” of streets. These measures were thought to be both practical and beautiful, and therefore provided a modern version of the *dulce utili*, which can be traced back to landscape beautification projects in Europe during the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, and in antiquity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, American landscape architects added a social, democratic conviction to the concept of the *dulce utili*. Referring to one of the three “unalienable Rights” listed in the American Declaration of Independence and declaring landscape architecture an art, Harvard University President Emeritus Charles William Eliot described the profession’s aim in 1910 as “the pursuit of public happiness.” In fact, happiness, John Nolen explained in 1922, would be created through beauty: “In our city planning we must provide for people, and if we are to successfully provide for people we must think of their happiness, and if they are to be happy, the beautiful must be included in any complete program.” Given the importance attributed to park-system planning at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that park systems could also become the core issue of electoral campaigns, such as in Harrisburg for example, where a Democratic mayoral candidate Vance McCormick based his successful campaign on the necessity to provide Harrisburg with a park system.

The Washington metro map described at the beginning of this article demonstrates the continuing impact of the park system as a pattern and element of urban form and as an iconic code or symbol. To what extent did the park systems and their iconography relate to the need for municipal and national representation?
Like public parks, whole park systems provided cities with representational means. The international acclaim of the Chicago Plan, in which the park system played a dominant role, was probably due to the fact that it had been promoted successfully on a local, national and even international level.\textsuperscript{45}

In 1920, the first issue of the short-lived American journal *The Park International* was published. The journal promoted “internationalism” and “universalism” in park design. Its first issue introduced the reader to the idea of “internationalism”:

> The field of Parks has no limitation of country or nationality. Interchange of ideas proceeds most advantageously when geographical lines are disregarded. It is mutually profitable to consider park scenes of other countries rather than follow too closely what may be the vogue in one’s own country. The selective reader will not favor or pattern after the character of foreign accomplishment; but, as the homereturned traveler, well advised by the English essayist, “only prick in some flowers of that he hath learned abroad into the manners of his own country.”\textsuperscript{46}

Besides being international and appropriating ideas from other countries, it was considered equally important to adapt them to the “American manner.” The journal’s chief editor, George E. Burnap, had already conveyed this conviction in his book on parks in 1916.\textsuperscript{47} Architects, landscape architects, and planners assumed that borrowing design motifs from foreign countries could serve national self-representation, a fact that became explicit in Washington’s McMillan plan. The highly symbolic design of the national capital’s municipal center resulted from a study tour through Europe that the consulting committee, the so-called Senate Park Commission, had undertaken in 1901 in order to appropriate design elements and discuss how they would successfully be transplanted to the New World. The wish to achieve at least “cultural parity” with the old European capitals, if not outdo them, guided the commission’s work.\textsuperscript{48}

The Mall, the centerpiece of Washington’s park system drawn up by the commission’s members, the architects Daniel H. Burnham (1846–1912) and Charles F. McKim (1847–1909), the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1870–1957), had already been conceived as a national symbol at the end of the eighteenth century by Pierre L’Enfant. It retains its iconic status today, as the map of the Washington metro testifies in its subtle way.
Notes:

The title is adopted from the bimonthly journal The Park International: An Illustrated Bi-monthly Magazine Offering From Widely Chosen Sources Guidance in the Development and Enjoyment of Park Areas Both Public and Private. The journal was published under the direction of its chief editor, the American landscape architect George Elberton Burnap, from July 1920 until May 1921.

1 Official metromap with the copyright 2000 of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. The original metro signage and system map were designed by Massimo Vignelli of Unimark International. The metromap was introduced in 1968, and with some alterations and adjustments is still in use today.

2 The importance of the park system for modern city planning in the United States has been recognized by Jon Peterson in his recent work. Peterson has observed that park systems had a far greater impact on city planning during 1902–1905 than had monumental civic centers. See Jon A. Peterson, The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840–1917 (Baltimore, London, 2003), 42, 162. David Schuyler has noted that “by the end of the [nineteenth] century, under the leadership of Olmsted and his colleague Charles Eliot, the park system became a comprehensive metropolitan solution to the recreational needs of the modern city.”  David Schuyler, The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America (Baltimore and London, 1986), 5, 149. Peter Hall has argued that “U.S. cities pioneered the concept of an integrated park system planned in advance.” Cf. also Robin F. Bachin, Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago 1890–1919 (Chicago, London, 2004), 167.


5 Cf. e.g. Sutcliffe, Towards the Planned City, 197; Collins, Werner Hegemann, 67, 143; Francesca Bagliani, Passeggi pubblici e verde urbano nel XIX secolo. Trattati di arte dei giardini e teorie urbanistiche, Storia dell’Urbanistica Piemonte/V (Rome, 2004).


7 For a historical overview of the evolution of modern city planning in the United States, see Peterson, Birth of City Planning.


12 Schuyler, New Urban Landscape, 192.


Hugo Koch, “Grün, Spiel und Sportplätze,” *Die Gartenkunst* 41, no. 6 (1928), 82.


Forestier, *Grandes villes*, 53.


44 Forestier, Grandes villes, 36.


