

Chapter 2

From Urban Reform to Parkway

The Early History of the Urban Park Road and the Parkway

It is doubtful that any single type of park area has been more widely misunderstood and misinterpreted than the parkway. The confusion is hardly to be wondered at when one considers with what free and easy imprecision the term “parkway” has been used.¹

Norman Newton, 1971.

1. INTRODUCTION

The early history of the parkway in the United States demonstrates that early city planners and landscape architects designed the urban and suburban parkway to serve the city – as a method of urban reform. By showing that the parkway has its roots in the city, this chapter lays the groundwork for the later conflict between the regionalist and metropolitanist planners as they try to put the parkway into the region.

If we are to understand the conflict over the planning of the regional parkway, it is important to understand that its early history indicates that the urban park road and the suburban parkway strongly influenced the conceptualization of the parkway in the region. Planners and supporters of regional parkways looked back to urban and suburban parkways as a guide for their own endeavors.

In his article “The American Parkways,” Christian Zapatka summarizes Charles Eliot’s description of parkways by “likening parkways to parks” and further defining a parkway as “essentially a road running through a park.”² This definition fits the design-oriented view that the parkway in the United States was on a historical trajectory that brought it out from the city, to the

suburb, and then to the countryside. Zapatka uses the terms “the urban, the suburban and the national.”³ This design-oriented description suggests a lack of controversy and thus fails to account for the conflict over planning in the region.

In a sense, the history of early parkways and park roads is the history of urban reform and city planning, which city planning and urban historians have noted.⁴ Unfortunately, the remainder of the history of parkways has largely been left to historians of design artifacts, who seem to forget the regional parkway’s roots in reform and the early city planning movement.⁵

The parkway is different from the highway. The original “parkway” integrated the natural reserve – the park itself – within the urban fabric. Zapatka’s analysis, for instance, views the “national” or regional parkway as the foundation for the “road running through nature” and reconstructs the history to point in this direction. In actuality, urban reform produced the urban park and parkway. The suburban parkway served the city as it grew and expanded, while the regional parkway developed out of the conflict over regional reform – reform articulated by the debate between the regionalists and the metropolitanists.

2. PARKS AND PARKWAYS AS URBAN REFORM

2.1 The Rural Cemetery Roots

The rise of industrialization and technology in the nineteenth century brought about changes in the urban form of the United States. The history of this change is well documented and broad.⁶ In *The New Urban Landscape*, David Schuyler argues that nineteenth century urban form evolved in three significant ways. First, the urban fabric opened up. Prior to industrialization, the economics of life required compact spaces. Industrialization and technology allowed for decentralization. Second, the growing middle-class desire to preserve and increase property values encouraged the development of public amenities. And third, technological advances, especially in transportation, allowed for the separation of space by use. People no longer needed to live where they worked.⁷ These changes led to a new urban form and provided ample opportunity for the creation of parks and parkways. The justification for this public infrastructure – the introduction of parks into the urban fabric – often dictated the discourse of reform.

While the broad philosophical impetus for parks and parkways rested in urban reform, it was the early rural cemetery that served as the physical model for reform. The first “rural” cemetery, Mount Auburn Cemetery in

Cambridge, Massachusetts, was conceived by Dr. Jacob Bigelow, a Boston physician aware of the health consequences of overcrowded graveyards in cities and interested in establishing an appropriate place for burials.⁸

The term “rural” is a bit misleading and needs some explanation. According to historian Thomas Bender, “rural cemetery” meant an appropriately landscaped ground at the edge of the city.⁹ David Schuyler further points out that the burial ground outside the city had classical antecedents that were both practical and spiritual.¹⁰ The concept of separation fits the modern industrialized city. However, as a place for recreation and leisure for the living, the rural cemetery blurred these lines of separation.

Mount Auburn opened in 1831 with the express purpose of serving the living, not the dead. John W. Reps notes in *The Making of Urban America* that many of the cemetery’s visitors used the space as a pleasure ground.¹¹ By the late 1840s, horticulturist and rural landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing stated that nearly 30,000 people visited Mt. Auburn in a single year. Similar numbers visited Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia and Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.¹² The visitors did not disturb the “sponsors,” as Reps commented, but they needed some sort of public recreation ground.

In October 1848, Downing, writing in the *Horticulturist*, commented on the use of cemeteries as pleasure grounds – with a view toward the development of parks.

Indeed, these cemeteries [Mt. Auburn, Greenwood, and Laurel Hill] are the only places in the country that can give an untravelled American any idea of the beauty of many of the public parks and gardens abroad. Judging from the crowds of people in carriages, and on foot, which I find constantly thronging Greenwood and Mt. Auburn, I think it is plain enough how much our citizens, of all classes, would enjoy public parks on a similar scale.¹³

Downing saw public parks as the epitome of a republican form of government, noting that even France and Germany, previously thought of as anything but republican, had set aside land reserved for enjoyment by all classes.¹⁴ The movement to build rural cemeteries in close proximity to the industrializing cities served as a prelude and model for the building of parks in American cities.

David Schuyler points out three ways the cemetery experience influenced park development and urban reform. First, cemeteries encouraged individuals to pursue self-reflection and realize the value of the natural world for self-healing purposes. Second, the cemetery served as a place that could inspire thoughtfulness and awe, hence Schuyler’s use of the term “didactic

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-7104-1>

Regional Visionaries and Metropolitan Boosters
Decentralization, Regional Planning, and Parkways
During the Interwar Years

Dalbey, M.

2002, XI, 202 p. 4 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-7104-1