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Creative Spaces: Catch Some Springtime Rays and Relax

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As spring weather sets in, people are shedding their winter coats and taking to the outdoors. In every city I've ever lived in, I've sought out neighborhoods with public green spaces nearby. But not all parks are created equal. What makes some parks so full of life and activity while others sit desolate, shunned by all but criminals and the truly desperate?

Huge areas of green space surrounded by great museums, public monuments, and other institutions, like the National Mall in Washington, DC or the 843 acres of New York City's Olmstead and Vaux-designed Central Park, are undoubted treasures, but most cities are too built up by now to green that much space. And that's okay. When we are challenged to think creatively, truly innovative solutions can be found. For example, just by closing one street, a city can create a linear park. Getting around on foot or bike is much more pleasant when you're traveling through greenery -- and properly planned, it needn't create traffic nightmares for cars, either.

The most successful parks include at least some of the following features:

- **Everyone is welcome.** The best places are those where young and old, new people, neighborhood regulars, and the whole panoply of characters that cities have on offer can gather to rest, play, and reflect. Places where you can pass the time by yourself, with friends, or chatting with a convivial stranger; places where you can read quietly or let off steam.
- **Safety and cleanliness.** A great park has well-lit areas at night and as few hiding places as possible during the day -- people feel most relaxed when they can see and be seen. Food stands are welcome, provided there are enough trash containers and recycling bins. Clean restrooms are a must. Playgrounds should have soft surfaces underfoot, like cork or wood chips.
- **Seating.** There needs to be a mix of comfortable seating -- and if the chairs and benches are attached to the ground and can't be moved into the sun or the shade, there should be enough of them in enough places so that people can make a choice.
- **Retreat.** Tall trees create a canopy, offering both shade and a buffer from street noises. Lots of nature and green compels us to slow down and de-stress.

- **Activities.** Parks should offer a mix of activities, whether they are bird watching or skateboarding, pet walking, bike riding, roller-blading, rock climbing, fishing, or reading a book. Ideally there should be a playground for kids and, space permitting, fields for ball playing and other high-energy activities.
- **Accessibility.** A successful park is accessible from all sides. New York City's Bryant Park is one of the more successful outdoor places because it's so easy to enter and exit it -- and it's clearly visible from the street. Convenient parking and access by public transit is important too.
- **Art.** Public art always enhances a space. Whether it's permanent sculptures or temporary visiting exhibits. Mixing art, design and creativity is fun and educational. Performing arts -- concerts, plays, and films -- are wonderful attraction for parks as well, especially on warm evenings.
- **Landscape.** Space permitting, expansive lawns can be as welcome a feature as formal gardens; artfully planted copses of trees can make a downtown park feel like a rural retreat.
- **Water.** Water features, such as a fountain, a pond, or a waterfall bring another element of harmony and beauty. The sound of moving water is always calming.

With the help of [Steven Pedigo](#), my colleague at the [Creative Class Group](#), I've scoured the world for playgrounds old and new, large and small. All of them incorporate at least some of the above elements, but most importantly, a visit to any one of them leaves you feeling rejuvenated and refreshed.

Barton Springs Pool, Zilker Park, Austin Texas



Spring fed, more than 900 feet long, and with a natural rock and gravel bottom, the Barton Springs swimming pool is one of the best-known features of Austin's vast Zilker Park. Created by damming up Barton creek, stairs and ladders provide easy entry and there are even diving boards. Though crowded, it is the closest thing that city dwellers are likely to find to the proverbial old swimming hole.

Photo credit: Flickr user roger mommaert

The Highline, New York, New York



About a mile long stretch of abandoned elevated railroad tracks on the lower west side of Manhattan has been planted with hardy native grasses, shrubs, and trees and transformed into an aerial linear park. A showplace for landscape architecture and a popular promenade, the Highline has also raised real estate values along its entire length, spurring commercial and residential development.

Photo credit: Flickr user Canon EOS 40D

Dog Park at Kitsalano Beach, Vancouver, British Columbia



One of thirty Vancouver parks where dog owners can take their dogs off their leashes and let them run, Kitsalano Beach features a spectacular views of the city skyline and surrounding mountains—and the people watching isn't bad either. Forbes Traveler deemed Kits Beach one of North America's ten sexiest in 2009, noting "the hedonistic frenzy that graces Vancouver's Kitsilano Beach when the July and August sun heats this intoxicating nexus of sea, forest and mountains."

Photo credit: Flickr user bwellsea

Noguchi Playscape, Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia



Atlanta's Piedmont Park was created in 1887 for the Piedmont Exhibition; the city bought the land in 1904. Perhaps the park's best-known feature is its sculpture/playground created by Isamu Noguchi in 1975. Recently renovated and restored, it is a unique and beautiful amenity—and appropriately enough, one that is much-loved by children.

Photo credit: Flickr user Reid2008

Ibirapuera Park, Sao Paulo, Brazil



Opened in 1954 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Sao Paulo, Ibirapuera Park was landscaped by Roberto Burle Marx. Many of the museums, exhibition centers, and official buildings were designed by the well-known architect Oscar Niemeyer.

Photo credit: Flickr user akasped

Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois



Built atop an Illinois Central rail right of way, Millennium Park added more than 24 lakefront acres to Grant Park. Its most famous attractions are the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion, a band shell, Anish Kapoor's monumental Cloud Gate sculpture, Jaume Plensa's Crown Fountain, which mixes video and water, and the two and a half acre Lurie Garden.

Photo credit: Flickr user pippawilson

Hyde Park, London, England



A royal deer park starting in 1536, Charles I opened Hyde Park to the public in 1637. Sites of interest include the Speakers' Corner, where virtually anyone may hold forth, and the bridle path Rotten Row (a corruption of Route de Roi), which runs between Kensington and St. James Palaces. The Crystal Palace was built on its south side in 1851 (and was removed in 1854).

Photo credit: Flickr user Endless_5piral

Boston Common and Public Gardens, Boston, Massachusetts



The Boston Common has been a public green since 1634; the Public Garden was opened in 1837. Though they are very different places—you might take a frisbee to the Common; you go to the garden to admire the botanical variety on display or leisurely paddle the pond in a swan boat—their 75 combined acres provide an oasis for natives and a major attraction for tourists.

Photo credit: Flickr user static

Chapultepec Forest and Park, Mexico City



Commonly known as "Bosque de Chapultepec" (Chapultepec Forest), this vast city park began as a retreat for Aztec rulers and is still the site of the president's official residence. The park includes a zoo, the National Museum of Anthropology, the Rufino Tamayo Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Museo del Caracol, which graphically presents the history of Mexico. A large section of the park is a Protected Natural Area.

Photo credit: Flickr user Alan Cordova

Balboa Park, San Diego, California



A public park since 1835, the site of the Panama-California Exhibition in 1915, and the California Pacific International Exhibition in 1935, Balboa Park's 1200 acres are rich in recreational amenities, formal gardens, historic architecture, and major cultural institutions, including the San Diego Zoo, the Old Globe Theater, and the Timken Museum of Art, to name just a few.

Photo credit: Flickr user

National Mall, Washington, DC



The Washington Mall was conceived by L'Enfant as a grand avenue or boulevard, but evolved into a magnificent green space instead, stretching between the Capitol Building to the east and the Lincoln Memorial to the west. A monumental work of civic art and the site of important protests and celebrations, the Mall is visited by some 24 million tourists every year. It is also a welcome refuge for city dwellers and office workers, who go there to eat their lunches on warm days and enjoy the fresh air.

Photo credit: Flickr user YoTuT

Evergreen Brickworks, Toronto, Ontario



For almost a century, the Don Valley Brickworks produced up to 43 million bricks a year. The new site is now a park and nature area and its sixteen historic buildings house a farmer's market, a gallery, and a variety of educational and environmental programs.

Photo credit: Flickr user Brian K YYZ

Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California



1017 acres—20% larger than New York’s Central Park, Golden Gate Park is three miles long and half a mile wide, and includes the Japanese Tea Garden, the oldest Japanese garden in the US, man-made lakes, a bison paddock, a stadium, a flower conservatory, and the Academy of Sciences and the De Young Museum.

Photo credit: Flickr user caribb

South Pointe Park, Miami Beach, Florida



The former site of police stables and harbor pilot facilities, the southern-most tip of Miami Beach is now a 17-acre park, filled with walking, running, and biking paths, picnic areas, restaurants, playgrounds, and a dog park. It's where the bay meets the ocean which makes for spectacular views, and is a favorite of locals, tourists, and film crews alike.