Reimagining park oriented development and the future of cities

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At the heart of every city are two great immutable facts. First, and very simply, cities are about people, lots of people, you and me. And, second, there was, is, and always will be some natural, physical advantage to every city’s location – if, of course, those natural advantages are embraced and valued when it comes to the “always” part. Taken together, these facts of city life, people and place, should always serve as the starting point for planning, designing, and building our cities and continuously improving them.

So, how do we build cities around people and place? In a word, parks. Parks in all their forms, from stream corridors to playgrounds to boulevards, are the middle ground in cities, where people and place come together and where we make good healthy places to live. Today, of course, our cities are assuming a new and increasingly profound role in the world as we face unprecedented environmental, social, and economic change. Accordingly, we need cities to succeed, and with them, the parks that make cities good healthy places to live.

The sooner we commit ourselves to organizing our cities around parks, and more specifically complete park systems, the sooner we will transform our cities into places where more people want to live – old and young, rich and poor, resident and visitor. Yes, cities need to be economic engines, but first, they must be people engines, places that attract and capture one’s imagination and energy. To accomplish this, cities must provide a beautiful natural environment and a real sense of respite, two fundamental, cherished, and intertwined human desires. This is park oriented development – the city organized around a park system that celebrates its natural environment, and in turn, nurtures the human spirit.

What do we mean by city parks and park systems?

City parks have an incredibly rich and dynamic history. If we allow ourselves an equally rich definition of city parks, then we will quickly discover wonderful and varied examples of parks throughout history, from Plato’s academy to royal hunting grounds and the “first” city parks of industrial England. All are places of beauty and respite. More recently, civic leaders in late 19th and early 20th century cities expanded on the potential role and function of urban parks mostly under the banner of the City Beautiful movement in cities like Chicago and Washington, D.C. Through robust plans and investments in park systems, they elevated the experience of the city by offering one at least the opportunity for a relatively continuous experience of nature that supported urban development at a scale larger than was previously contemplated.

The distinction between parks and park systems is not insignificant. Today, we mostly have individual parks despite the easy reference to park systems that we often use to describe the collection of parks in a given city. Historically speaking, it is the difference between Penn’s plan for Philadelphia with its individual squares anchoring quadrants of the city versus any number of Olmsted’s plans for cities as disparate as Boston and Louisville linking individual parks with
and through natural systems, transportation, and development. Unfortunately, as cities lost people throughout the 20th century to communities offering healthier natural environments and a greater sense of respite, the industrial era park system, worn, beleaguered, and in some cases besieged by incompatible uses, could not keep pace.

Why and how should we practice park oriented development?

The enduring advantages of cities as centers of community, education, opportunity, innovation, and stewardship are now reasserting themselves and offering new opportunities to rebuild our cities around park systems, neighborhoods, commercial districts, and greater numbers of people. More importantly, the economic transformation of some cities from industry to information and the exponential growth of others are confronting our cities with arguably the most pressing global question of our time. Will cities emerge as the centers of sustainable development? Or, will other, mostly destructive, settlement patterns continue to erode any opportunity to build healthy ecological, social, and economic systems? Park oriented development is the answer to the question, “How can cities attract people and serve as the world’s centers of sustainable development?”

A simple return to the City Beautiful movement, or even earlier Baroque city plans, might suggest the strategies, tools, and principles for a new citywide practice of park oriented development, but just as cities and parks change over time, so has and should the meaning of park oriented development. Whereas the City Beautiful movement emphasized civic order and grandeur through a network of monumental elements and the removal of unwanted uses and people, park oriented development needs to respond to an entirely different agenda that addresses critical issues of ecology, equity, and economics. Park oriented development needs to result in urban places that are, at a minimum, healthy and safe, and in their most expressive form, places that unleash the power of people in cities.

We begin practicing park oriented development by first asking about the condition of the natural environment in the city. Neighborhoods and commercial districts ebb and flow over time, but the one constant in any city is its natural environment – if we commit ourselves to making it our touchstone. Look around any city today and imagine the city we can make if we fully engage the rivers, streams, bays, hills, and valleys where our cities began. Again, in most cases, there was and is a physical natural advantage to the city’s location and we should rediscover and celebrate that relationship as the basis for city building.

Two points of clarification might be necessary here. First, the focus of park oriented development is on cities and not metropolitan regions with their mix of low density and segregated land use development patterns. As Jane Jacobs rightfully admonished us, “A region is an area safely larger than the last one to whose problems we found no solutions.” Let us keep our attention on cities and work to make them great places to live for everyone. Second, while ideas about nature and cities lead at times to squabbles about “suburbanizing” cities, especially in academia, park oriented development is fundamentally about one’s experience in
a city, rather than what someone else thinks one’s experience should be in a city. Cities are not one size fits all, and neither is park oriented development.

By beginning with the natural environment in the city, we can essentially adopt a variation on Christopher Alexander’s urban design formula of “public space, then buildings, then streets” as a framework for city building in contrast to the more conventional approach of designing street networks, then buildings, and finally public spaces. This, in turn, leads to the next series of questions and considerations in park oriented development. How do we relate to the natural environment? Protect it? Impact it? Enjoy it? In effect, how do we build with the natural environment in the city?

Efforts to answer these questions introduce us to the strategies and tools available today for park oriented development, strategies and tools that can change over time as we gain new information and knowledge. Indeed, one of the particular benefits of park oriented development is that it can always tap into the here and now. Best practices available in urban conservation, green infrastructure, and bicycle and pedestrian planning, for example, are immediate ways for us to protect, mitigate our impact, and enjoy the natural environment in the city.

Beyond our immediate relationship to a city’s natural environment, park oriented development asks how we extend or draw that relationship through the urban experience and a city’s fabric. Specifically, what is the condition and relationship of our public and private gardens, traditional park spaces, boulevards, and parkways? At a minimum, we want to establish a unifying vision for park oriented development involving all of these elements, and one that is simultaneously practical and symbolic at the neighborhood and city scales – that is, it should work and it should inspire.

To test this framework and answer the questions posed in this section, we can evaluate the condition of and relationship among the following six basic elements of park oriented development in every neighborhood and citywide:

- Urban conservation
- Green infrastructure
- Paths/Trails/Sidewalks
- Parks
- Boulevards/Parkways
- Mixed use development

By urban conservation, we mean the condition of natural areas, from stream corridors to urban forests to critical wildlife habitat. Green infrastructure is the key connection or joint between protected natural areas and places for human use. If an apartment building is located adjacent to a stream, for example, we can site the building and any ancillary structures so that the development and stream are in the most advantageous or symbiotic relationship for water quality and quantity, vegetation, habitat, light pollution, and views. Paths, trails, and sidewalks
then offer one the opportunity to experience the city’s natural areas more fully. How safe, comfortable, and convenient are they? Where do they go?

The paths, trails, and sidewalks that allow one to experience natural areas also connect us to more familiar park spaces, such as playfields, playgrounds, squares and plazas, in and between neighborhoods. Many of these traditional park spaces are what come to mind when we discuss urban parks, and many are also woefully absent of daily use and value whether ecological, social, or economic. Better planning and design of these parks would have immeasurable benefits for everyone in a city. Two additional pieces of the puzzle in the armature of park oriented development are the boulevards and parkways that we use to travel between neighborhoods and across the city. Boulevards and parkways can support and extend the pedestrian experience with bicycle routes and transit services, and be places of beauty and respite in their own right with plantings and places to pause or meet.

Of course, the success of park oriented development relies on the success of development related to the park system. Fortunately, park systems and development go hand in hand. The potential for development closest to a continuous and diverse park system is enormous, and should be maximized relative to its context – for example, a natural area versus a boulevard. By carefully planning the neighborhoods and districts around a park system, that is, understanding development type, scale, and form in terms of park elements and adjacent development, we can realize the potential of park oriented development for both the individual and the city at large. Mixed use development, in particular, plays a key role in the overall ensemble by activating different elements of a park system throughout the day. The desire to maximize development will always be great, yet the process should always be measured against the long-term condition of the natural environment in the city and the individual experience.

How can we implement and sustain park oriented development?

Given what we currently know about natural environments in cities, park oriented development involves actions as discrete as a small private garden with its impact on natural systems to major acquisitions of new parkland and real estate development. Park oriented development during the City Beautiful movement often built park systems that literally framed the center city with parks, parkways, and boulevards lining the urban edge and anticipating future growth. Park oriented development today offers the singular opportunity to establish a matrix of intersecting park elements that stitch the city and natural environment together within and across neighborhoods and commercial districts. The former is like a picture frame dividing inside and outside, the latter like a kaleidoscope with an untold number of possible connections and experiences.

As we all know, cities are built one investment at a time, from major public expenditures to individual efforts to rehab a single home. We also know that in every city there are neighborhoods and commercial districts isolated to one degree or another that limit the potential of cities and the people living and working in them. The great benefit of park oriented development is its ability to marry the enormous advantages of cities with the vast potential of
human enterprise and innovation. Countless examples of individual park oriented development projects throughout history and across the world offer us models. Nash’s London, Haussman’s Paris, and any of Olmsted’s urban park systems, to name just a few, remind residents in those cities daily about the role and value of parks in their lives. Similarly, initiatives today to green streets in Seattle and Portland, remake waterfronts in Toronto and Hamburg, expand traditional park spaces in Bogota and Guangzhou, and many others provide invaluable lessons learned and best practices at the block and neighborhood levels. As stand alone projects, involving fractions of an acre or hundreds of acres, they are individually powerful and critical pieces in the ongoing process of city building. The question is whether we can apply many of the same strategies and tools at the city scale also as part of an intentional, deliberate, and urgent strategy to build and rebuild cities.

To make a city that works for as many people as possible, park oriented development must operate simultaneously at the block, neighborhood, and city scales. Everyday politics are one way to achieve park oriented development across a city, and there are likely hundreds of examples, if not more, of “park trading” in most larger cities. Relying on everyday politics, however, presents us with three potential drawbacks. First, will a piecemeal approach result in a connected park system that really works for everyone? Or, are we simply crossing our fingers and hoping for the best? Second, if we focus exclusively on one park system improvement, say a boulevard, pocket park, or trail, are we missing the related opportunity to maximize neighboring development? And, third, it is often beyond the scope of a single park or development project to understand how the project fits with the city’s natural environment. Nevertheless, if cities are to thrive as great collectors of people, natural systems have to be integral to every project’s design – that can only happen by first thinking at the city scale.

All of these questions are process issues and typical of cities, with professions, standards, and policies in different organizational silos. In truth, park oriented development is part parks, part transportation, part water services, part open space, part development, and all people. And, that leads us to perhaps our most important point about park oriented development. Just as the individual experience in the city is the impetus for park oriented development, so the individual act is the basis for making it a reality in a city. Because park oriented development requires a holistic view, if not a complete understanding, of a city’s natural systems, it seeks to shape the relationship with the natural environment in every corner of a city. In terms of community involvement, it can be as direct as placing a trowel in a garden bed or as complex as making a citywide plan.

So, why should park oriented development take a leading role in building cities over any number of other efforts trying to make cities more competitive and livable – from sustainable development to green urbanism? Because park oriented development is the first “how” to the “what” of many other efforts. It is fundamentally about making great places to live and is utterly pragmatic, opportunistic, and adaptable. It provides a clear vision of where we want to go. While costs may seem problematic, examples of park oriented development consistently demonstrate their immediate and enduring value. Park oriented development represents our best hope to make cities that people will enjoy, and in doing so, a world that is sustainable.