Book Review

The Regeneration of Public Parks Jan Woudstra and Ken Fieldhouse (eds), London: The Garden History Society, Landscape Design trust and E & F N Spon with the support of English Heritage, 2000

This well-edited collection of illustrated papers represents a further step in the rehabilitation of public parks as a subject of wide professional concern and interest. By the mid-1990's few could be unaware of the sad condition into which, allegedly 'public,' parks had fallen. Confused municipal, professional and community perspectives, a lack of funding, of commitment to conservation, and clear guidance had left these urban leisure facilities stranded behind their railings and shrubberies. This, in stark contrast, to the advance of garden-centre inspired private horticulture.

Hazel Conway's study, *People's Parks* (1991) began to re-focus attention. From 1995, when English local authorities were required to seek specialist advice from English Heritage, and from The Garden History Society before determining relevant planning applications, the tide began to turn. The Urban Parks Forum drew together disparate interests, stimulating the Heritage Lottery Fund to establish its Urban Parks Programme in 1996. The UPP has subsequently commissioned restoration plans for 130 parks, and has supported over a hundred schemes in parks, as well as cemeteries and urban spaces.

It is to underpin this widespread process of renewal that this attractive book has been prepared. Though short and concise, each chapter manages to reflect the quality and detail of historic research which has developed in the subject. The many examples, drawn almost entirely from Britain, are frequently illustrated with photographs contrasting historic and contemporary views. This diversity of illustrative material is instructive and deserves consideration in the discussion of urban public spaces (as in chapters on the use of iron, and paths).

The first four chapters set the scene and methods of enquiry, with David Jacques on 'Memory and value' neatly raising complex issues. Similarly, Mary Lockwood's account of 'Study Methods' for the analysis of historic parks is a valuable guide for students and local interest groups. Like much of this text, the clarity of content allows easy reference to the broader urban contexts encountered in urban design.

Central chapters are devoted to landscape elements — structures, iron and paths, shrubbery and bedding, water and sport facilities. Each draws on historic sources and well-chosen illustrations to enliven sensibly organised texts. Together they provide a valuable and practical introduction to the understanding of park design and restoration.

With little fanfare, this collection serves to reinstate the significance of public parks in contemporary towns and cities. Though major issues such as future public use and acceptability, and the vexed question of long-term maintenance support are perhaps, underplayed the international significance of our park heritage is evident.

Figure 20 shows an elaborate drinking fountain at Clifton Green in Bristol, manufactured in Glasgow. In Summer 2000 I was involved in an exploratory conservation visit to Belmonte, a former cocoa port in Bahia, Brazil. Its extensive public spaces — evidence of earlier mercantile affluence — still hinted at the desire to design a city in the European tradition. Little surprise, perhaps, that a very similar iron drinking fountain shipped from Glasgow, and recently restored, still provides the focus for a public square.

Although the title might suggest otherwise, this is a useful reference which deserves the attention of a wide urban design readership.

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