

ICOMOS-IFLA DOCUMENT ON HISTORIC URBAN PUBLIC PARKS

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PPREAMBLE

Historic urban public parks are an essential and inalienable part of the traditions and plans of many towns and settlements. It is the main purpose of this document to emphasize that they be preserved as historic sites for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Historic urban public parks were created or made accessible for the well-being of all persons. They have for too long been regarded as 'reserve grounds', i.e. commodities to be 'filled' or used for events and activities of specific groups for which they were not designed. Many have undergone changes detrimental to their historic qualities, design, vegetation, character, and uses. The importance of integrating public parks in town planning schemes was acknowledged in the 19th and the early 20th centuries, so many of them date from that era, but some urban parks may be older or younger.

Definitions for concepts such as promenade, boulevard, avenue, tree-lined street, canal, etc. can be added as footnotes to the document by authorities and park management in their respective countries as necessary.

HISTORIC URBAN PUBLIC PARKS - DEFINITIONS

- 1 The concept 'public park' rests on the principle of openness and accessibility for all people to visit and enjoy. The concept is not limited or defined by size.
- 2 Public parks are typically in public ownership and represent 'common wealth'. They may be owned by one or more public bodies or public foundations that are responsible for their oversight, knowledgeable care, and stewardship.
- 3 The concept of 'park' is sometimes used synonymously with words such as garden, square, or similar expressions. (Conversely, the word 'park' can denote 'grounds' in some languages.) Fundamental to the identity of historic urban parks is their composition and dependency on such elements as vegetation, architectural elements, water features, paths, or topography. These elements contribute to their character, seasonal interest, shade, and spatial and visual identity.
Nota bene. There are parks and squares to which the general public do not have any rights of access, however, they do contribute to the ecology, amenity, and historic form of cities; these can be considered historic urban parks, though not public spaces.
- 4 Historic promenades, boulevards, avenues, and tree-lined streets are not public parks, but constitute a special category of public space. It is important that adequate care be taken to preserve their particular characteristics.
- 5 In many cases, historic urban public parks may be located along, or linked by, boulevards or tree-lined streets (see the previous passage). They form green arteries that can connect public parks with other public spaces. They and their component parts must be preserved, regardless of the fact that some parts may have been created at different times.

HISTORIC URBAN PUBLIC PARKS - VALUES

- 6 Historic urban public parks often accrue a range of values, including social and intangible values to local or wider communities; aesthetic values for their design or character; horticultural and ecological values; and civic value as places where public protests or major gatherings, such as celebrations, etc., have occurred. Due to their value to communities, these values, meanings, and functions should be explained, celebrated, and safeguarded. They often form the core of why public parks continue to matter to people.

SPECIAL CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS OF HISTORIC URBAN PUBLIC PARKS

Spaces, Views, Planting, and Vistas

- 7 An historic urban public park may include one or more defined spaces. The sizes, relationships, and proportions of these spaces, whether wide or small, narrow, open, or closed, and their component parts, must be understood, their original purposes and meanings recognized, and appropriately protected or conserved.
- 8 There may also be views, focal points, and viewpoints within historic urban public parks that are integral to their design and contribute to their identity and appreciation.
- 9 Historic urban public parks are places with defined perimeters, yet their visual dimensions often extend beyond their limits. The distant panoramas, sight-lines, vistas and views provided by them are typically part of their integral, heritage-character-defining elements. The vistas and views may even be the reason why the parks came into being in the first place, and why they have been visited and appreciated by generations. Views of historic urban public parks are often important parts of historic streets and the wider identity of the city or town.
- 10 Historic vistas, views, and viewpoints are to be preserved; the planting of new vegetation, as well as siting or re-siting of elements outside parks, such as built forms, art works, water features, or commemorations, must not interfere with them. Infrastructure, such as bus shelters, directional signs, utility posts and boxes, and other urban installations, such as billboards, that would obstruct or detract from heritage-character-defining vistas or historic character, must not be erected within key views. Interpretive signs should be located where they are visible to visitors, but not intrude on important views or the other experiential qualities of the park. Parks and their immediate surroundings - that serve as their buffer zones - must be kept free from vending machines, transformers, and other such structures that would detract from their ambiance.
- 11 The vegetation of historic urban public parks must be freely seen by people from the surrounding areas. Thus the views towards parks must not be blocked or diminished by elements such as billboards, large traffic signs, parking structures, or other infrastructure. Also parks have vegetation that is important to their character, for example giving them a strong sense of enclosure. An historic urban public park constitutes a physical, as well as visual, respite within the surrounding built environment and it is important for passers-by to see and to enjoy the movement, colours, sounds, and shade of the vegetation. Active programmes of renewal and replanting play an important part in its stewardship.
- 12 In some circumstances, historic urban public parks were conceived in relation to adjacent urban spaces, streets, canals, or buildings. In others, their introduction influenced the quality of the neighbourhoods, spaces, and built form that developed around them. They are thus often intrinsic components of historic town planning schemes.

Under these circumstances, the preservation of parks and their settings, in matters of quality, design, and scale, is equally important. Changes in the height or massing of adjacent buildings can adversely impact spatial relationships, views and vistas, microclimate (sun/shade/wind), and the authentic character of the primary historic design; such changes must be avoided. Increasing height of adjoining buildings can increase shade or wind downdraft, actively and negatively impacting on the health and condition of parks and their vegetation, as well as the experience of their users.

- 13 Similarly edge condition elements, such as street width, paving materials, street tree planting, lighting, and other heritage-character-defining elements must also be carefully considered and conserved. Care is required in selecting new elements and materials to be used adjacent to historic urban public parks to ensure that these complement their character.

Topography

- 14 Historic landforms, topography, and grades, such as mounds and swales, as well as historic features, such as terraces and rockeries, are often an integral part of the lay-out and character-defining elements of an historic urban public park. Even minor changes in these can be detrimental to the overall design, rhythm, and the relationships of spaces, views and vistas with each other, and should be avoided. Large underground structures should not be built within historic urban public parks. Major disruption for infrastructure upgrades (drainage, electricity, or other service pipelines) should be avoided or minimized where possible. Options to locate these outside historic urban public parks should be investigated and followed wherever possible.

Light

- 15 Natural light, sunshine, and shade are some of the reasons people find relaxation and solace in parks and gardens. For many urban dwellers, historic public parks offer the only opportunity to enjoy these natural qualities in densely built city centres.

If night lighting is to be added to enable enjoyable and safe public use after dark, lamp posts and fixtures must be selected and located so that they enhance the character, spatial relationships, views, vistas, sight-lines, and other historic-character-defining elements of parks, rather than detract from them. Thus compatibly-designed posts and fixtures should be used, rather than standard street light posts and fixtures. In some areas, night lighting of parks should not spill into the night sky.

Environment

- 16 Historic urban parks are important for urban biodiversity and can support a range of habitats and species and provide urban populations with direct access to nature. The flora and fauna of the park should be understood and protected. Where possible, and where compatible with the character of the park, the environment and habitat should be improved to enhance interconnected ecological corridors.

Many historic urban parks contain water features and planting originating in other parts of the world. The use of water and energy to maintain these features needs to be managed in a sustainable manner.

HISTORIC STUDY, PRESERVATION, AND MANAGEMENT

General Remarks

- 17 The stewardship of historic urban public parks and their component parts must be based on careful research, original documents, such as photographs, and evaluation of their condition in relation to an inventory of the existing park conditions and future uses. These studies must be done by qualified or appropriately experienced experts. It is equally important to research the evolution of the planning and development of historic parks and their settings, as well as their importance for local communities. It is also important to establish and actively maintain archives of related historic documents that can be used as the basis for their on-going maintenance, management, and stewardship.

All such work must be documented, and the records must be deposited and protected in accessible public archives to assist reference and understanding, and ensure the benefit to future generations. Such records can and should inform future conservation and management decisions and actions.

- 18 The overuse of historic urban public parks can adversely impact both the enjoyment of them and the retention of their historic character, quality, and component parts. Overuse can also stress their vegetation. Therefore, appropriate management procedures must be established to control the number of visitors based on the carrying capacity of each park and the historic buildings in them; these should be calculated and monitored regularly. Options such as restricting access and limiting hours of entry (or numbers per hour, etc.) should be investigated, tested and monitored. In order to alleviate the overuse of historic parks, municipalities should create and maintain well-designed new parks for their inhabitants, and park programming should be based on a determined carrying capacity, so that use can be supported without undue damage to them. Regular checks on carrying capacity and monitoring of damage or other impacts should inform such planning and management decisions.
- 19 Original and later compatible elements and furnishings, such as fences, gates, lamp posts, railings, paving materials, rubbish bins, seating, art works, and vegetation should be protected and repaired or replaced-in-kind when damaged or at the end of their life-cycles. Re-assessment of the significance of non-original, later, and compatible elements should be undertaken at regular intervals and inform planning and management decisions.
- 20 The general principles for the conservation of historic urban public parks are the same as those for other historic parks and gardens, as cited in the ICOMOS-IFLA Florence Charter on Historic Gardens (1981), Article 10.

UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE DESIGN ADAPTATIONS

- 21 Because historic urban public parks are publicly-owned cultural resources that should be accessible to all, some of their components or areas may require modification in order to ensure that they are universally accessible without adversely impacting their heritage values. The recommended approach should integrate, rather than segregate, those who are physically challenged. Thus, design professionals should use an integrated approach to design solutions for all users, rather than creating separate facilities for those who are physically challenged. Any new accessible design interventions should fit sensitively and unobtrusively into historic urban public parks without compromising their values, character-defining elements, and experiential qualities. Options to do so with minimal change - i.e. the minimal introduction of new materials or signage, should be actively investigated before any changes or interventions are made.

UNIVERSAL APPLICATION

The above principles and recommendations apply to all historic urban public parks anywhere in the world. However, in some countries, exemptions may be granted from statutory requirements, if such changes or interventions would adversely impact the historic integrity of the park.