

# The New REPUBLIC

October 7, 2010

BOOKS AND ARTS

## Park Here

***Chicago, New York, St. Louis: America Has Rediscovered the Big Urban Park, and We're a Better Country for It***

***From Boston to New York City to Chicago, check out some of America's newest urban parks—the good, the bad, and the ugly—in this TNR slideshow.***

A common complaint of criticism is that become more an increasingly balkanized into interest groups whose meaningfully with people not in large measure share. The phenomenon of American debated, but its existence is feature of American culture (some would argue long middle and upper classes began cities to settle in more socially homogeneous suburbs.

In the last several decades, this accelerated and taken non-to the advent of new technologies. The Internet preaches an ideal of “customization” and a cult of “communities of interest,” creating ever-dividing microsplinters of social affinity and similarity, which are then further hardened by the new specialized channels appearing on cable television seemingly every month. All the while, the Internet’s listservs, social-networking sites, and blogs seduce users into the illusion that they enjoy a World Wide Web of connections, all to their own kind. What of the public realm? (The Internet is a realm somewhere between public and private: a new hybrid universe.) For decades, urban historians, social theorists, and pundits have been predicting or lamenting the demise of this amorously defined yet inarguably important social form: some kind of arena, typically physical, in which a large number of people – different people – regularly interact.



*The High Line*  
New York City

*Millennium Park*  
Chicago

*Citygarden*  
St. Louis

contemporary social American society has archipelago than a nation, ethnic, class, faith, and members rarely interact whose affiliations they do pervasiveness of this selfaggregation can be pretty plain. It has been a since at least the 1950s before), when the white their mass exodus from and culturally

balkanization has spatial form, mainly owing communications

For Arendt, its paradigmatic form was the agora. Habermas (who also identified it in the media) located it in northern Europe's taverns and pubs. More recently, sociologists, cultural theorists, and architectural and urban critics have acknowledged that the sort of political discourse championed by Arendt and Habermas does not often unfold in public places but have not significantly revised this characterization of the public realm: it is an actual place, a place in the city, a place to which people from various classes and walks of life routinely come.

Since the 1970s, three urban forms have been most frequently discussed as potential sites for this sort of social exchange: cultural institutions, streets, and shopping malls. The interest in streets, a legacy of Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was adopted as the calling card of the Congress for New Urbanism, a politically active organization whose best contribution to American urban planning has been to discourage traditional suburban settlement patterns in favor of higher-density, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use

developments. The interest in cultural institutions and shopping malls, a consequence of a decades-long construction binge on these two building types, has held the attention mainly of those who bemoan the public realm's demise into the commodified irrelevance of a merely public place. The forms and meanings of the human interactions that unfold in each of these arenas, and the role of architecture and urban design in their creation and character, continue to be subjects of debate.

Even if political discourse has largely decamped to satellites and networks, democracies need actual physical places in cities where dissimilar people routinely see and interact with others. Encounters in such places must be unstructured and non-goal-oriented, because humans, wired to concentrate on goals when goals are set before them, will focus on people whom they might not otherwise see (or whom they might otherwise choose to ignore) only if the pursuit of concrete goals is withdrawn. Only in such urban places can different peoples bump against one another unintentionally and—one

hopes—thereby come to appreciate the company of strangers and the otherness in themselves. Urban streets? Too much chance of personal injury. Cultural centers and shopping malls? Too much class stratification, too many shopping opportunities. The obvious place is the urban park.

The urban park is not one type but many: the neighborhood playground or soccer field, the pastoral retreat from metropolitan smog and frenzied ways, the vest-pocket slip of a lunch spot, the community garden, the unbuildable swamp redefined as treasured wetlands. Those are not the types of park I wish to discuss here. I prefer to dwell on the centrally located park that is accessible and appealing to many classes of people from different walks of life—the great urban park. It must not be so large that inside it one loses a sense of the city. This type of park is typically important enough (and expensive enough) that municipalities work hard to weave it into the overall identity of the city. Over the course of a given year, many different activities and events happen there—concerts, rallies, festivals, fairs.

After a half-century-long dry spell, major new urban parks have opened in Boston, Chicago, New York City, St. Louis, and Seattle; others in Buffalo, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Toronto, and elsewhere are in planning or under way. Many sit on, or incorporate into their design, defunct artifacts of the American industrial landscape: railroad yards, lines, and depots; underutilized or disused ports—acres upon acres of cracked concrete or yarrow-covered property, asking to be re-purposed for clean living. The deindustrialization of the American economy that left behind these vacant lands has gone on for generations, but the trend toward re-conceptualizing them as potential public parks is fairly new. One reason why is obvious. Demographic movement in the United States from the 1950s to the 1990s was largely from center to periphery, from city to inner suburb to outer suburb to exurb to edge city. In the last two decades, however, money and people have begun to flow centripetally as well as centrifugally.

Experts applaud this development for many reasons, not least because one clear means of slowing global warming is by moving people, especially resource-gobbling Americans, into more densely populated, resource-efficient, less auto-dependent human settlements. But if live in cities we must, we need to refurbish, re-plan, and re-build them to accommodate the needs of the new era. On this ambitious agenda of social reconstruction in the city we must include shoring up existing infrastructure, building new transportation systems, and facilitating the development of attractive and varied types of affordable housing. But no less essential will be more and better open spaces that aerate the city and allow sunlight to fall into densely populated urban areas. These will be the public realms of our future.

More and more major urban parks will be constructed in the coming years, so it makes sense to consider carefully some that have recently been completed. Two of the largest are Chicago's Millennium Park, which opened in 2004 and won a Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence in 2009, and the Rose Kennedy

Greenway in Boston, which opened in stages in 2007 and 2008 and is not likely to win an award anytime soon. Two important smaller projects, both of which opened in 2009, are Citygarden in St. Louis and the High Line in New York City; the latter recently won prestigious awards from the Urban Land Institute and the Rockefeller Institute. Each of these projects is in one or several ways unique. Even so, considering them together reveals the landscape of contemporary major urban parks: their designs, the politics and economics of their development, and their impact on the urban economic, social, and cultural landscape.

Let's begin with the bad—the Rose Kennedy Greenway, which offers a dispiritingly high number of cautionary tales and directives about the obstacles that lie in wait to stall out such projects. The 1.5-mile-long Greenway sits in downtown Boston atop newly buried sections of Interstates 93 and 90, the most technically complex portion of the controversial sixteen-year-long Central Artery/Tunnel project known as the Big Dig. It was the largest and most expensive (\$22 billion) public-works project in American

history, replacing an elevated highway that had bludgeoned its way through the city for nearly half a century, severing its waterfront and historic North End from the adjacent downtown.

What an opportunity: twenty-seven acres linking downtown to harbor in one of America's most celebrated cities! Yet no one could call the Greenway a success. It is not merely bad, it is dreadful, a useless wind tunnel bordered by busy multi-lane streets and skyscrapers of unfortunate pedigree. Chronically underused—"Call it the Emptyway," one headline in *The Boston Globe* advised—its landscape design consists of incoherent and eye-injuring variations in paving flanked by Do-Not-Step-on-the-Grass grass, the occasional water element, and the predictable plant beds. The only exception is the northern portion of the park, designed by the fine firm Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, led by Kathryn Gustafson, who also designed Lurie Garden in Chicago's Millennium Park—but more on that later.

Parsing all that went wrong at the Greenway will be a worthy dissertation topic for some student of urban public policy, but several elements of the

story are clear. One is that city officials, with Boston's mayor, Thomas Menino, at the helm, never settled on a firm vision for the Greenway. A second is that the Boston Redevelopment Authority, a city agency, never established a collaborative relationship with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, the state agency that owns the land, managed the Big Dig, and has little competence in the creation of public space. A third problem, which is especially evident if one compares the experience of Boston to those of the other three cities, is that private donors committed to the city did not coalesce into a politically effective force to countermand the stasis resulting from ineffective public leadership and administration.

A power vacuum ensued, and in the echo chamber of committee meeting rooms, people argued, argued, and argued. Some wanted to keep the Greenway a coherent entity; others wanted to parcel it out into sections and use the space to knit back together neighborhoods that had been rent asunder half a century earlier. Developers wanted to build; environmentalists and

self-designated protectors of the public realm insisted that not a single inch be privatized. Paralysis ensued. In the end, the Greenway, underfunded and under-prioritized, was killed by public process.

The Boston experience suggests that for a major urban park to develop, there must be leaders with a strong vision and political clout, garnering public support and funding for the project, shepherding it from design to completion, ensuring that countervailing forces do not derail it. And comparing Boston's failure to the success stories of Chicago, St. Louis, and New York City yields a second lesson: in today's tax-evasive political landscape, high-quality major urban parks typically need more than deft public leadership. Public/private partnerships are essential.

If critics were equipped with bullhorns, I would pull mine out here. The final important lesson to be learned from Boston is that good design is not a luxury. On top of all the other ways the Greenway fails, it fails because it is merely grass and flowers, and the great urban park must be more than that. Even a mediocre urban park poses

special design challenges, because so many disparate considerations must be taken into account, requiring myriad talents and expertise. The great urban park must be architectural, because it needs to resolve the city's large scale with the human body's small scale and hold its own within the aggressive architectural environment that is a city. It must look beautiful in September and beautiful in March. It must sustain the assault of weather, inconstant maintenance, and human despoilment. It must absorb runoff and aerate the environment. The great urban park is infrastructure, garden, architecture, playground, place of public gathering, private lunch spot, gallery for public art. It must be of the city, but itself a distinctive place.

All this requires the landscape architects who design such parks to be masters of their own trade and excellent collaborators, and to be fluent in the various arts of architecture, urban design, sustainability, and political negotiation. Further complicating the task, landscape architects designing the great urban park work for, and answer to, an abstraction: the public. They must be able

to think pragmatically about satisfying the demands of those who employ them, and they must be able to think philosophically and sociologically about the generations of people who will be the users of what they design.

Which brings us, inevitably, to Frederick Law Olmsted. He was certainly America's greatest landscape architect, who designed, among others, Manhattan's Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Parks. But what, precisely, is the contemporary relevance of the work of a landscape architect whose formative years were spent before the Civil War? How much can the canonical Olmsted teach us, who live out our days in this highly urbanized, environmentally troubled, digitally besotted, socially heterogeneous culture and society? But in the attempt to articulate precisely why the twenty-first-century urban park needs not just good but excellent design, Olmsted may be found hiding behind every embankment, in every *allée*.

Parks and buildings are both parts of cities, but even a poorly designed building acquires an identity simply by virtue of being an object in

space that people use. A poorly designed urban park, by contrast, always runs the risk of being merely void: Boston's Greenway is a case in point. Olmsted understood that the great urban park is more than a place for people to appreciate the structure of tulips and feel the grass beneath their feet; and more even than a place where different sorts of people could come at any time for free. Three distinctive features make Olmsted's parks more than simply nice: aesthetic coherence, a deep narrative richly told, and the possibility of a transformative personal experience in the city.

Of these lessons, the simplest to explain is the first. The remarkable Central Park, 843 acres, contains playing fields, baseball diamonds, *grandes allées*, formal gardens, a skating rink, a boating lake, and picturesque walking paths. Yet these dozens and dozens of different kinds and moments of experience do not compromise the park's aesthetic coherence. Olmsted's second lesson is that the great urban park must include narration. This lesson addresses form, not content—Central Park's story of restoring equilibrium between

city and country is a tale that no contemporary urban park could credibly tell. But formally, designers of today's urban parks will make distinctive places in the cityscape only by telling its users a story (or stories) of their own about their cities and the place of nature and people within them. And Olmsted's first two lessons, aesthetic coherence and storytelling, lead to a third: the great urban park must be designed so that it substantively changes its users' experiences of one another and of the city. This is the sort of project in social transformation that contemporary architects and landscape architects, burned from their elders' experience with some of the misfires of modernism, wrongly shun. Few disagree about the social importance of not just public places but also a public realm. Landscape architects should embrace, and some are doing so, the full responsibility that naturally falls to them.

Chicago's 26.5-acre Millennium Park, St. Louis's 2.9-acre Citygarden, and New York City's High Line have all transformed underused or abandoned areas in the middle

of their cities into green, open, public spaces. Each is a popular success, and each has stimulated development, especially residential development, in the immediate area (the figures from Chicago, whose park was completed five years before the other two, are especially impressive), thereby bringing their cities monetary gain and the environmental benefits of increased density. What of their designs, then, and what sort of public realm does each park offer, or—if one accords to design the active role that it merits—construct? In what ways are these parks the public realms we want?

Answering such questions reveals the many ways in which the funding, the politics, and the local circumstances of contemporary urban parks configure their designs. This is especially evident with regard to Millennium Park, by far the largest of the three, and the contemporary urban park par excellence. Chicago's story likely will sound increasingly typical in the coming years: visionary and determined leaders, public and private, doggedly raising money, public and private, all the while negotiating compromises, flooring

opponents, and navigating the public process to massage and bulldoze their project to its successful completion.

Millennium Park is a remarkable success by many standards. Sitting atop an underground four-thousand-vehicle parking garage and a depot for the Illinois Central Railroad—boosters call it the world's largest green roof—Millennium Park is a vibrant public space, filled on sunny days with camera-toting tourists, white collars tethered to bag lunches, spillover Art Institute visitors eating in the outdoor café, local residents, kids messing around in Crown Fountain, runners stretching, tours on Segways. Twenty million people have visited Millennium Park since it opened. Its (largely unforeseen) economic impact on the city has been extraordinary: Chicago enjoyed a 47 percent increase in leisure travel in the past five years (as compared to a national increase of 6 percent), and 165 new residential developments have opened since 2004. Local retail and commercial profits have soared. Millennium Park has transformed Chicago's East Loop, once a quiet business district largely empty after

dark, into a genuine 24/7—okay, not in January—public space, and it has attracted residents to this greener downtown, helping to advance Mayor Richard M. Daley’s agenda to make Chicago the “greenest city in America.”

Still, Millennium Park is a collection of great moments rather than a great urban park. The initial master plan, drawn up in the 1990s by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, broke up the gently sloping site into “rooms” delineated by architectural elements and planting. While not an innovative idea, it is not in principle a bad one, having been used in formal gardens and parks for centuries. As private funds played an ever-greater role in covering the park’s \$490 million cost, the sponsorship of these “rooms” was doled out to various donors (\$220 million from private donors, though it must be pointed out that this figure includes the cost of the public sculptures and architectural elements). The plan of Millennium Park reads like a section of *Who’s Who in American Business*: Wrigley Square, McCormick Tribune Plaza, Crown Fountain, Boeing Galleries North and South, AT&T Plaza, Chase

Promenade. These “rooms,” like schoolchildren rushing to get the best seats in the auditorium, compete with one another for the front row, creating a visual and sensory cacophony that ultimately fails to differentiate Millennium Park from the city itself. There is Frank Gehry’s Jay Pritzker Pavilion, all stainless steel fits and starts. The northwest corner is dressed for the ball, outfitted in neoclassical stairs, balustrades, and colonnades constructed from locally quarried stone. Other architectural elements, including the nearby McDonald’s (yes, them too) bicycle parking facility, as well as the parking garage entrance pavilions, are done in the cool manner of classical modernism. In sum, Millennium Park is, aesthetically speaking, sadly incoherent.

Three sections—Crown Fountain, AT&T Plaza, and Lurie Garden—so successfully overcome the unfortunate synergy of stakeholder-donors and unimaginative design that they make of Millennium Park a successful public realm anyway. The vitality of the first two rests wholly on large sculptures by Jaume Plensa and Anish Kapoor. Both these

monuments wrest parkgoers from the inner narrative of their own subjectivity, confronting them with the spectacle of themselves as objects in the unfolding monument of metropolitan life. And bookending Plensa’s 232-foot-long shallow reflecting pool in Crown Fountain are 50-foot-tall glass-block towers from which project the faces of Chicago residents of different ages, genders, ethnicities, and faiths, each aligned with the next so that the fountain’s water appears to spew forth from their mouths. Although different faces appear in succession, at any given moment two faces appear to be responding to one another in an eerie and captivating dialogue. Anish Kapoor’s mirrored *Cloud Gate* (“The Bean”) projects distorted reflections of visitors, their movements and regroupings, in the surrounding cityscape, giving people little choice but to look at themselves in the context of what surrounds them—the city they inhabit but too often fail to see.

At Millennium Park only Kathryn Gustafson, with Lurie Garden, has created a successful public realm that bears the characteristics of a

great urban park. Eschewing the rest of the park's wearying reliance on Beaux-Arts compositional tropes, Gustafson and her collaborators, Robert Irwin and Piet Oudolf, took from the existing site conditions cues toward a plan. Fifteen-foot-high topiary hedges spatially define the garden, separating it from the adjacent open field of Gehry's concert space and the crowded "rooms" along Michigan Avenue. A wood-paved boardwalk, edged on one side by a five-foot-wide, multi-tier reflecting pool, arcs through the garden, tracing an axis that links the north side of the city (and now, Jeanne Gang of Studio Gang's wonderful new Aqua Building) with the Art Institute to the south. Hundreds of native-grown species create a garden divided into light and dark "plates," as spectacular in February—when uncut grasses and dried-out sedum heads luxuriate in snow—as in floriated May. Architecturally controlled, spatially and topographically varied, Lurie Garden offers visitors a powerful experience of quietude within the city, moments full of wildness, wildflowers, and an ever-changing story about the

climate and flora of the Midwestern plains. Here Gustafson and her collaborators elegantly demonstrate how aesthetic coherence, spatial definition, and narrative poesis can create an excellent urban amenity.

**B**oth the High Line, designed by James Corner Field Operations in collaboration with the architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro, and Citygarden, designed by landscape architect Warren Byrd of Nelson Byrd Woltz, are smaller parks, and so they are more typical of what may appear in coming years. Of the two projects, the High Line is the superior design, but Citygarden is the more compelling example of the social good that a great urban park can bring. Both demonstrate how public officials, working in partnership with private donors, can use these projects to bolster and redefine neighborhoods, cities, and publics.

How a set of abandoned railroad tracks elevated above the western edge of the Chelsea district of Manhattan were transformed into the High Line is a tale that does not need re-telling: it is

already the stuff of urban legend. In any case, the gestation of the High Line resembles that of its much larger kin, Millennium Park. But the singular story of Citygarden's origins is less known, and merits more discussion. From 1907 on, St. Louis's city planners envisioned a mile-long strip of park land from the Mississippi River to Union Station (once the busiest train station in the world, now on the National Register of Historic Places); but it was never properly developed. Then the city's fortunes began to fall. St. Louis bled out more than half its population in half a century. By 2000, much of the city center resembled downtown Detroit, a flatland of boarded-up townhouses and vacated office blocks. The mall once imagined as a majestic sweep from riverport to railport became yet another packed-dirt, chickweed-covered vacant lot in yet another gutted downtown.

In 2006, the Gateway Foundation, a private non-profit devoted to creating and paying for new public spaces in and around St. Louis, brokered an agreement with the mayor's office to build a new public park on the two

city-owned blocks stretching between the historic neoclassical Old Courthouse and the stripped neoclassical, Depression-era Civil Courts building. In a nearly unbelievable civic gesture, the Gateway Foundation, on its own, developed Citygarden from start to finish, at a cost of \$30 million and, at what could only have been a staggering additional cost (undisclosed), stocked the park with twenty-four pieces of public sculpture. And not just any sculpture. Now standing on two blocks in downtown St. Louis is more public art by renowned modern and contemporary artists, per square foot, than can be found anywhere I know outside of a museum. This includes work by twentieth-century sculptors such as Léger and Maillol; blue-chip contemporaries such as Martin Puryear and Tony Smith; and younger, lesser-known artists such as Donald Baechler and Julian Opie. The city retains ownership of the land, and the Gateway Foundation is committed to shouldering the costs of security and maintenance.

Citygarden's Warren Byrd and the High Line's James Corner designed landscapes that narrate stories about what

places these parks have been and have become, each in their way constructing and laying claim to a distinctive sense of place. Byrd gets points for degree of difficulty: he faced a flat site in a nearly empty downtown. Still, he, along with the Gateway Foundation, can be faulted for trying too hard. Twenty-four sculptures is just too many to stuff into three acres of park, even if most are, by the standards of the genre, comparatively small. (One imagines Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* gobbling up the entire site.) Byrd's design, too, is in places oppressively oversized. He does establish a coherent sense of identity with a two-block-long curving limestone wall-cum-waterfall that creates a needed focal point, and affords spatial and acoustical separation from adjacent Chestnut Street, and offers up a site for group gatherings. This wall steps up to six feet at its highest point, where it frames a large video screen—baseball games and old movies are sometimes shown here. With furniture, topographical variation, and additional water features, Byrd does also carve out enough variety and incident in other parts of the park to afford some of the sculptures the breathing room

they need. Citygarden's narrative thread is a tale of the interplay between St. Louis's history and its topography: the bluffs of the Mississippi River, Native American ceremonial mounds, the flatlands of the Midwestern plains.

In the High Line, Corner and his collaborators wisely let their design be guided by the extraordinary piece of urban infrastructure that is the site: a set of aging elevated train tracks spanning twenty-two blocks in lower Manhattan. Still tied and pinned in place, these tracks run along a simple, handsome path built up from concrete beams laid side by side, ends slanting down to dive into the platform deck. This structure runs the length of the site, reinforcing the park's sense of linear procession while offering up a vocabulary flexible enough to integrate the park's other elements, such as lighting and furniture, into the fabric of the whole.

The elevated railroad that became the High Line opened to commercial rail traffic in 1930 and closed in 1980, made irrelevant by the dominance of commercial trucking. Nature's reclamation of the abandoned tracks into an overgrown tangle of goldenrod, grasses,

and artemesia gave Corner and his collaborators a termination point for their story and the starting point for a sustainable design. A quiet, remarkably restrained composition of drought-tolerant perennials, grasses, shrubs, and trees, most native to the region, frame the walkway and enliven the path. Breakout moments in the High Line's linear logic are a glassed-in bank of auditorium-like seating hung off the platform and offering views onto the street below, and multi-tiered decks apportioned with generously sized chaise longue-type benches. Walking along the High Line, one catches frequent glimpses and then full views of the nearby Hudson River—itsself one of Manhattan's greatest monuments, and too often out of sight.

Corner is the leading theorist of a highly influential design movement called Landscape Urbanism, which seeks to reclaim landscape architecture from the preciousness of garden design by marrying it with regional planning and, especially, with urban design. This is a welcome and long overdue development in the profession, for which Corner

can claim partial credit. But it is also part of Landscape Urbanism's agenda to eschew coherent aesthetic programs and legible narratives—such things are deemed passé. Corner is given to pronouncements that form is out, networks and systems in; and that today designers should concentrate on creating neutral forums that can host an ever-changing series of appropriations and “events.” These ideas tend to come packaged in the tiresome, randomly boldfaced discourse of postmodernism, making it all play extremely well in the halls of the academy.

Fortunately, Corner has proved himself a better designer than some of his theories might suggest. He and his High Line collaborators claim that they wished to “save the High Line from architecture.” Lucky for us, they did nothing of the sort. Corner claims Olmsted as one of his heroes, and like Gustafson in Lurie Garden, he has learned Olmsted's lessons on aesthetic coherence and narrative form in order to construct in design a narrative and an experience that is powerful, simple, and clear—a tale of Manhattan's industrial past, and of its subsequent

deindustrialization, and of Chelsea's transformation from an oft-skipped local stop, filled mainly with warehouses and meat markets, to an upscale retail and residential district with street life, tourists, and a promising future. Like Lurie Garden, the High Line is superb. Olmsted need no longer be the reference point for the future of the great urban park.

The gentrification of Chelsea was under way long before the High Line, although the park certainly helped to establish as a credible residential neighborhood an area that previously had little open space and no park. Citygarden's impact on St. Louis has been more extraordinary, although its full extent will not be measurable for years. Downtown St. Louis already had begun to enjoy an economic upsurge before the opening of the park (the figure usually given is that since 2000 there has been \$4 billion in public and private investment), and approximately five thousand residents have moved into the neighborhood. Since Citygarden opened, a major office block adjacent to the site is undergoing renovation for re-rental, the main branch of

the public library is also undergoing renovation, and the National Park Service, which owns the famed Gateway Arch, is sponsoring an international competition for a waterfront park.

Even better, whereas before Citygarden the vacant lots between Chestnut and Market Streets functioned as an invisible barrier dividing white, middle-class St. Louis on the south side from African American St. Louis to the north, this land has now become the site where white privilege meets African American disenfranchisement, becoming what the Russian constructivists used to call a social condenser. Visiting Citygarden on a warm day, where office workers lunch, kids play in fountains while caretakers sip coffee, and people in headphones follow the audio tours of the art, it is difficult to imagine how those responsible for its design could have feared, as one told me she did, that on opening day no one would even venture in.

When politicians, philanthropists, and journalists consider how their work might advance the cause of social justice, they typically do not speak the language of design. This is wrong. The new

great urban parks in Chicago, St. Louis, and New York open up new vistas in a project that everyone should embrace: the creation of a cleaner, more livable, more humane, and more just twenty-first-century city. The failure in Boston demonstrates that we cannot leave it to our public officials to create our new public spaces. They need help.

*Sarah Williams Goldhagen is the architecture critic for The New Republic. This article ran in the September 2, 2010 issue of the magazine.*

**For more *TNR*, become a fan on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.**