

# The Beached Park

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## **Abstract**

While urban beaches may be functionally, legally, and administratively identical to parks, social scientists and others typically resist viewing them as parks. This paper offers four reasons—one etymological and three historically contingent—to account for the tendency.

## **The Saltwater Effect**

WHILE DOING A RESEARCH PROJECT about public spaces in U.S. cities a few years ago, I noticed an odd pattern in the literature I was reading. Social scientists, historians, and others, I observed, rarely write about city beaches as city parks. Although scholarship about “parks” might include case studies of beaches (e.g., Low et al 2005), research focused on beaches makes little reference to the wider literature on urban parks. (The trend is broadly discernable, but examples include Bahnam’s 1972 account of Surfurbia; Edgerton 1979; Davis 1992; McKinney 1995; De Ruyck et al 1997; Latham 1997). I have found the pattern slightly odd—even though it appears in my own work (Davidson 2007)! By definition, a “beach” is a very particular sort of landscape, one that lies along the shore of the sea and over which waves break (OED 2015). A “park” is not defined by its location, and one can take an infinite variety of forms—save a beach, it seems. Why is this? Beaches are, after all, prominent public spaces in coastal towns that provide outdoor recreation and contact with nature. Many beaches constitute or are contained within parks administered by city parks departments. Courts equate beaches with parks as “traditional public fora” in determining public access rights to the shore (see, e.g., Thomas 2010). For the average person, a day at a beach is likely to yield many of the same sorts of emotional and physical benefits as one spent at a park. Hence beaches may be functionally, legally, and administratively identical to parks. Why do researchers typically resist treating them as such? Does the presence of saltwater change parks into something else?

In this brief essay, I speculate on why writers insist on treating the beach *qua* the beach rather than as a sub-type of park. I identify the cause as four factors—one etymological and three historically contingent—that currently inform commonsense understandings of parks and beaches. These are, first, the sense of enclosure that is intrinsic to idea of a park, as evident in

the word's etymology. Beaches, among the most open of spaces, contradict this sense. Factors 2–4 reflect the influence of seminal park planners in the late-Romantic period, when the nation's first city parks were discussed, planned, and made. In particular, I highlight the influence of Andrew Jackson Downing and the Frederick Law Olmsted (Sr. and Jr.), whose philosophies and landscape designs did much to condition how subsequent generations of Americans would think about parks. These individuals viewed parks as purposefully planned, constructed, and maintained landscapes. Most beaches, by contrast, occur naturally. In addition, the types of landscapes that the early park planners thought appropriate for their creations bore little resemblance to the flat, sandy surface of a typical beach. Lastly, nineteenth-century park designers, along with a wider stratum of Victorian reformers supportive of the urban park movement, believed that social interaction in well-designed parks would improve the moral and medical well-being of working-class visitors. By contrast, prominent urban pleasure beaches, such as Coney Island and Atlantic City, were viewed as rowdy, uncontrollable places subversive to the reformers' agenda. As a consequence of these factors, I suggest, beaches and parks are viewed as unlike—even antithetical—landscapes.

I elaborate the points below. The paper is brief, and the case it makes necessarily circumstantial. It is hoped, however, that the paper can help refine thinking about parks and beaches in a way that clarifies why they seem different.

### Enclosed Versus Open

One reason why people tend to view beaches as distinct from parks is that beaches are open spaces. A park, as made clear in the word's etymology, is a bounded place. Early forms of the word “park” appeared in thirteenth-century legal charters to mean land containing “beasts of chase” for landed gentry (Landrum 2014, 16). As the word evolved, its variants extended the idea of enclosure from the realm of territorial privilege to that of physical boundary. French, Gaelic, German, and other European variants of the term in use from the 1300s to the 1800s have been translated as “an enclosure,” “a sheepfold,” “a space surrounded by walls,” and “a palisades to hold wild beasts” (Pearce 1958, 99). European explorers in North America, far from the densely settled landscapes of the Old World, used the word to describe pockets of land surrounded by natural features such as forests and mountains. This use of the word traveled west with explorers along the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. John C. Fremont, for example, used the term in 1843 synonymously with “mountain cove” to mean a high mountain valley (Pearce 1958 100). As globalization has spread the Western model of the city park

to other parts of the world, its spatial connotations have gone with it. Thus, when critics complained that Hibiya Park in downtown Tokyo was closed off to its surrounding neighborhood, park designer Isoya Shinji responded that the root of the German word for “comfortable,” *behaglich*, derives from “hagen,” which means “fence” (Shinji 1993, 55). Hence, Shinji argued, some degree of enclosure is necessary to make park users feel comfortable.

Beaches offer the antithesis of enclosure. In presenting the unbroken vistas of the ocean and horizon, the beach evokes the vast sphere of planetary nature that can seem to dwarf the human realm. One Los Angeles psychiatrist prescribes visits to the beach to assist patients who are dealing with personal crises. “There's something about walking on the beach, seeing the endless horizon and experiencing the ocean's infiniteness, that helps people who feel so constricted they see no alternatives. It can really help in breaking an impasse,” he explained (Krier 1979). The openness of the beach may be comforting, but it contrasts radically with the boundedness of a park.

The lack of physical barriers on the beach finds its corollary in a lack of behavioral ones. Beaches are the only place where many Americans directly interact with nature in a fun, exploratory manner. Along the shore they “poke about, pick up, touch, shape and play with (the beach's) physical material and the creatures it supports—crabs, shellfish and worms” (Tunstall and Penning-Rowsell 1998, 329). In addition, people on beaches remove much of their clothing, swim, lie down, doze amongst strangers, and behave in other ways that would seem unusual or provocative elsewhere (Edgerton 1979). Some have suggested that the borderless beach, where land and water merge in a liminal realm, is a subversive, carnivalish place that inverts norms of everyday life (Walton 1998; Shields 1991). One can walk in a park looking dapper, but, as photos of Richard Nixon at San Clemente reveal, strolling the surf in Oxfords and a collared shirt looks hidebound.

### Created Versus Found

Another contrast between beaches and parks concerns their naturalness. Parks are understood to be planned, constructed, and maintained landscapes. Beaches, in contrast, are by and large the products of natural forces that continually remake them, independent of human will. The idea of parks as designed landscapes owes much to the philosophies of late Romantic-era park planners and advocates, such as the Frederick Law Olmsted (Sr. and Jr.) and Andrew Jackson Downing. As pioneers of the urban park movement, the Olmsted and Downing rank among the most prominent figures in the scholarship on park history in the United States. Their prominence

is justified because they helped plan the nation's first major urban parks, articulated the importance of parks in their writings and statements, and strongly influenced the attitudes of their peers and subsequent generations of park professionals.

These figures viewed parks as created landscapes. Beaches might provide the same benefits as parks, including healthful environments, contact with nature, and opportunities for recreation, but as *found* spaces beaches did not qualify as parks. Downing, for example, argued against locating New York's first major park in Jones' Wood, a landscaped country estate along the East River, because the shore location was already healthful and recreational and did not need to be transformed into a park. (In 1844, William Cullen Bryant, editor of the *New York Evening Post*, had endorsed the site for precisely this reason. Bryant wrote that little work would be required to make a park of Jones' Wood except to "cut winding paths through it, leaving the woods as they now are, and introducing here and there a jet from the Croton aqueduct" (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992, 21.)

Several decades later, Olmsted, Jr. and his partner Harland Bartholomew would propose integrating several miles of Los Angeles County shoreline into a regional park system, but only after transforming the beach through intensive engineering and redesign. They proposed raising and widening the beach from Playa Del Rey to Santa Monica Canyon. Along this six-mile stretch, they felt, the construction of homes and businesses had left the beach too narrow. They also proposed building a parkway on the upper berm. At 370 feet across, the parkway would have been nearly four times the width of the Champs Elysees. It was to contain forested land with promenades for pedestrians and roads for automobiles. As an alternative, the planners recommended constructing a causeway 2,000 to 4,000 feet offshore and creating a marina (Hise and Deverell 2000). Only after turning the beach into a human creation would it become a park.

### **Picturesque Versus Obscene**

The type of designs the influential, early park planners had in mind for their creations also helped set beaches apart from parks. These planners sought to realize in their parks specific aesthetic compositions that contrasted fundamentally with the flat, open layout of a beach. Downing and Olmsted, for example, had inherited from Great Britain a specific set of culturally mediated aesthetic ideals for viewing nature. These included, first, the picturesque, a way of visually interpreting the assembled components of an area as a unified landscape. The second, the Picturesque, mediated between the

contrasting landscapes of the Beautiful (the small, orderly, smooth) and the Sublime (the wild, powerful, terrifying). They and other nineteenth-century park designers sought to achieve in their parks landscape compositions that created unity while combining elements of the Picturesque and the Beautiful (Young 2004; see also Morawinska 1977). The Sublime, considered ideal for parks in the eighteenth century, fell from favor in the later Romantic era. Olmsted, for example, created pastoral landscapes that would not set loose the tumultuous emotions evoked by the Sublime. As illustrated by Olmsted and Vaux's "Greensward" design for Central Park, the ideal park included dense vegetation, gentle slopes, and winding pathways that teased users with a pleasant sense of mystery (Scheper 1989, 391; see also Carr 1999). By contrast, beaches tend to be unvegetated spaces that leave little to the imagination. Golden Gate Park offers an instructive case study. The park's western edge covers what used to be sand dunes several hundred feet from the swash zone. William Hammond Hall, the park's engineer and first superintendent, utilized an innovative method of stabilizing the dunes by planting them with barley and, subsequently, pine trees and other dense vegetation. When completed, the shoreward-most end of the park contained thick forests and gardens that marked it as distinct from the now-foreshortened beach (Young 1994).

### **Upraising Versus Lowbrow**

A final reason why beaches seem opposite to parks stems from the way in which Romantic-era medical and moralistic conceptions of nature became embedded in the philosophies of the seminal park designers. These figures conceived of nature as salutary to the physical and moral well-being of the urban proletariat (Boyer 1978). The nineteenth-century pleasure ground park was anticipated to bring this virtuous, balance-restoring nature to residents of industrial districts who, it was feared, too often succumbed to disease and dissipation (Young 2004). The reformers' view of the slums was famously evoked in 1842, when Charles Dickens described the Five Points neighborhood in lower Manhattan: "Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays" (quoted in Peterson 2011, 63). In order to deliver nature's benefits where they were needed, parks would have to be located within walking distance of tenement districts like Five Points. The economics of site selection did not always make this possible. Central Park in New York and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, for example, were built on the urban fringe, far from the major working-class neighborhoods. However, as park-makers knew, urban growth would eventually bring the

city to the park. Yet a typical beach location would remain permanently on the edge of a city, where its medical and moral benefits would be attenuated in distant, interior slums.

But could a beach actually achieve the civilizing goals of the reformers? In this period some of the nation's most well-known urban beaches were gaining reputations as venues for rowdy, freewheeling behavior. On their days off, industrial workers sought the liberating thrills and outré freedoms of beach resorts like Coney Island and Atlantic City, where roller coasters, saloons, brothels, sideshows, and other attractions formed an alternative sort of pleasure grounds. To reformers of the 1880s and 1890s, Coney Island was "Sodom by the Sea" (Kasson 1978, 34). Rather than deriving much-needed relaxation and contact with nature, crowds were subjected to the mechanistic thrills of roller coasters and a panoply of unwholesome temptations. Here and at similar resorts, historian John F. Kasson has argued, the emergent mass consumers of the industrial age defined their own entertainment agenda, one that implicitly rejected the lofty normative ends that reformers hoped to achieve with parks. To influential citizens and opinion-makers, the two landscapes—beach resorts like Coney and parks—had contradictory influences on the medical and moral well-being of their users.

Here I conclude my admittedly brief and circumstantial, but hopefully plausible, case. Researchers tend to view beaches as something different from parks because of four factors that inform current understandings of beaches and parks. The first, the idea that parks are enclosed spaces, is etymological, but the other three are historically contingent and owe much to the influence of prominent park makers and advocates in the initial phase of park making in the United States. The contingency of three of the factors suggests that new understandings of these ordinary landscapes may one day emerge.

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