

The park is a familiar part of the urban landscape that is to leisure as office buildings are to work: a sign and symbol of society's ideas about leisure time and how to spend it. Just as office buildings can embody civic expression, anchor people's cognitive maps, and play other roles outside their function as workplace, so too are parks more than places of recreation. The urban park has multiple functions and meanings for its users and for the city it represents. A park can be an expressive work of material culture, in the best cases an idealized version of nature interwoven with culture. The park is an amenity that fuels real estate values and intercity competition for investment. It is a place of retreat but also of social encounter. Increasingly it provides wildlife habitat, a setting for natural processes to relieve the environmental stressors of the city, and a medium for working out ideas of sustainability in local context.

Having so many obvious benefits and perhaps because as leisure spaces parks seem somehow uncomplicated, we see them as basically good, and better still if somebody undertakes to improve them. Thus Central Park or Bryant Park in New York enjoy widespread reputation as examples of park regeneration. Little thought is given to all the choices managers made along the way; if anything, the authorities are assumed to have made the best choices, indeed, the only choices they could have made. Beneath these wholesome narratives of renewal lie a great deal of thought, debate, hard work, and difficult choices. There is no simple formula for building a new park or regenerating an existing one. The choices park agencies make are greatly influenced by planning standards and codes, aesthetic ideas such as hewing to an original designer's vision, and by political-economic processes. What is often missing is any well-developed knowledge of how particular management choices will affect the uses and users of the space.



What we at ActKnowledge advocate and provide is rigorous, high-quality evaluation research to inform a range of design and programming choices and ground the collective will to provide for parks adequately. Research can reveal the depth of meaning parks have for users and adjacent communities. We can find out how people use and value spaces as they are and then again after physical improvement or programming change. We can evaluate the potential impact on park use of specific proposals or alternative proposals. We can identify cultural relationships that may exist between park resources and established groups and communities.

Our Method

Any well-used public space will have certain patterns among its users: weekday bench sitters; high school students hanging out after school, families and suburban teens on summer weekends, tourists, lunchtime office workers sitting on the grass, political activists and speakers, cyclists and skateboarders,

several categories of walkers, homeless people, sexual identity groups, and so on. We call these groups *constituency groups*, in that they have common interests, preferences, needs, and wants with respect to the park. The constituency group, an important unit of analysis in studying public spaces, can be identified and consulted through focused research.

In our work we use a variety of methods to identify constituency groups, determine where they locate themselves in the space, how they move around, and what boundaries exist or don't exist among groups. We try to discover how places work as social spaces: do people organize themselves within different zones or in some other way? What spaces are preferred by whom, and why? What do people know about the layout, facilities, and programs available? Where do different user groups feel comfortable and where do they feel uncomfortable? What about the space do people like most and like least? What kinds of conflicts arise, either among users or between users and police or users and park resources?

Constituency groups also sort out along demographic and geographic lines. Constituency research would find out women's uses and preferences versus those of men, or whether older people feel comfortable and welcome. What are people's fears and aversions? Do visitors feel equally at home in all locations or are there important differences among spaces in uses and user attitudes? We can find out whether different activity groups—inline skaters, adults with children, etc.—are predominantly male or female, older or younger, poor or well-to-do. We can get a sense of where users come from and how people get there, that is, on foot, bike, subway-bus, railroad, automobile? How many come in



conjunction with other business and how many make the trip primarily to use the park?

Recreational facilities are important features of many parks. Through careful observation and survey/interview data we can understand and evaluate recreational facilities: how well people use them, what activities the facilities attract and when, what conflicts arise from different kinds of use, and how adequately the facilities match the demand. We can find out what people want and assess whether a new or proposed amenity will have the effect its proponents intend.

Participatory Planning and Design

Theory of Change is a participatory planning process in which staff, park users, and other stakeholders set forth a plan of action and strategy beginning with a causal framework that identifies what they are trying to accomplish and what it will take to do it. In other words, we facilitate group processes to model the chain of outcomes that participants believe must take place to reach the long-term goal. The value of this approach lies in choosing the strategies and other actions according to what is most likely to bring about the desired outcomes. A Theory of Change brings overall clarity to the intended outcomes of programs and designed spaces; it describes *how* we want things to be and *what* we need to do to get there. Having a Theory of Change is the best starting point for program evaluation: it instructs the evaluator on what outcomes to look for and identifies the most accurate indicators of those outcomes.

Our public space research toolkit includes user surveys and census counts, structured observation, ethnographic methods, and participatory planning and design.

| Method | Sub-method | Description | What can be learned |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| User survey | Exit survey | Fixed-response questions given to random sample of park visitors as they leave or at predetermined locations. | Basic preferences, likes, dislikes, and visit and visitor characteristics. |
| | Online survey | Same as above except respondents complete survey online. Can be effective at concerts and other crowd-attracting events. | |
| | Phone survey | Fixed-response questions given to random sample of area residents. | Basic preferences, likes, dislikes, and level of use. |
| Ethnographic research | Individual interviews | Interviews with users in the park asking open-ended questions. This method can be combined with surveys where follow-up interviews are conducted with interested survey respondents. | Preferences, likes, dislikes, meaning, beliefs and values relating to the park, fears, and knowledge of park features; also visit and visitor characteristics. |
| | Participant observation | Systematic observation and note-taking by trained observer who interacts with users. | Contextual-interpretive information about use and cultural life of the site. Informs research questions. |
| | Behavioral mapping | Record locations of users and their activities in time and space. | Relationships between the park feature and the activity that takes place there. |
| | Key-informant interviews | People with particular knowledge: managers, planners, architects, public officials, park workers, vendors etc. | Official knowledge, goals and objectives, intentions; also knowledge of workers gained through maintaining the space or serving the public in it. |
| | Transect walk | Interview conducted while walking through space along a route chosen by interviewee. Walking through the environment stimulates thoughts, memories, and beliefs that may remain unvoiced in stationary interviews. | Individual-phenomenological understanding of deeper meanings of the park in a person's life-space. |
| Structured observation | | Counts of users by activity at given locations over time. | Numbers of users using particular facilities; helpful for pre- and post-intervention evaluations. |
| Census count | | Count and extrapolation to estimate total user population. | Annual visitation. |
| Focus groups | | Conducted with willing users or residents to discuss particular park-related topics. | Beliefs, values, ideas held by members of a particular constituency group. |
| Literature review | | Of archival material, media coverage, and published literature to develop histories of spaces, users, and issues over time. | Changes over time, issues that have come and gone, histories of use, historic conflicts. |

The Full Value of Parks

At ActKnowledge we believe that the most valuable aspects of urban parks are the ones least noticed: their ability to counteract the increasing separation and distancing of people from one another in contemporary life according to divisions of class, age, race and ethnicity, and place of residence. Parks and other public spaces allow different kinds of people to claim space, practice their particular activities and rituals, encounter one another, relax, and have fun. We feel that well cared for, culturally inclusive public spaces are essential to sustaining civility and social capital in the urban context. Parks have long

been seen as a necessary component of social capital: people need places to go and places to come together, and parks answer that need. However, modern urban people have difficulty connecting with one another in the public realm: In the presence of strangers, we tend to observe rather than engage. Encountering strangers is commonplace even within neighborhood space and overwhelming in metropolitan environments like midtown Manhattan, the subway, and other non-local settings. Of all the forms of public space, parks have certain characteristics that make them particularly favorable to breaking down barriers and supporting social interaction, for at least the following reasons:

- First, parks are for everyone. In the 1970s, William H. Whyte set out to discover why some New York City public spaces were successful, by which he meant filled with people and activity; while other spaces stood unused. Whyte showed that even in the heart of the metropolis, public spaces designed with their users in mind can create many, significant moments of sociability. The bar, the café, the social club are all insider territories. The park is more inclusive: the individual need not be known or to have a history there to be able to walk in and stake a presence. Yet the spatial organization of the park allows people to appropriate territory within it, transforming it into a secondary home ground.
- Second, as spaces of nature, parks have a calming influence. The nineteenth-century park designer Frederick Law Olmsted saw city parks as naturally relaxing environments where people could encounter one another without the reserve and suspicion that pervades urban public environments generally. Olmsted's insight remains true today.
- Third, again as spaces of nature, people feel physically free in parks in ways they generally do not elsewhere—free to sit, lie down, swing their arms, jump and dance. People notice their surroundings more, and use more senses than just sight. Free movement and heightened sensory awareness leads to freer social interaction.
- Fourth, parks are durable. Although the urban fabric overall has the characteristic of stability even as the inhabitants and commercial entities come and go, parks are even more stable than the streets and buildings, and much more stable than the commercial public spaces which, important as they are at any point in time, enter and exit the stage with surprising frequency. Thus parks are reliable constants in the urban flux.

If parks help connect people with one another, it is important to know how so as to help fulfill the potential of public space to support social connection and engagement.

ActKnowledge Qualifications and Experience

ActKnowledge is a social enterprise that connects social change practice with rigorous study of how and why initiatives work. ActKnowledge joins with community organizations, nonprofits, foundations, and government in efforts to transform traditional institutions, public spaces, and the environment.

Based within a research center at a large public university—the Center for Human Environments at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York—we benefit from our interactions with faculty and graduate students. Faculty and students are often part of our work. Recognized as leaders in the development, training, and practice of the Theory of Change (TOC) methodology, we have used TOC as a foundation for organizational capacity building, clarifying goals, evaluation and organizational change. TOC provides a way for all stakeholders to own an initiative. We favor the TOC process because it is participatory, rigorous, provides a framework for credible and relevant evaluation, and because it is a great way to communicate to others what an organization is doing.

We are proud that our employment of graduate students provides them with financial resources and the opportunity to work in their field. Several ActKnowledge staff have written their master's thesis or dissertation in conjunction with project work.

ActKnowledge staff have extensive experience in studying the use, knowledge, and valuing of public space, including ethnographic studies of urban national parks and beaches in New York, Jersey City, and Philadelphia, usership studies of New York landscape parks, and a sociological study of a city neighborhood affected by the attacks of September 11, 2001. Two ActKnowledge staff members used Prospect Park in Brooklyn as the setting for their doctoral research in environmental psychology. Three of us are urban planners and/or have worked in public sector planning agencies in New York and Philadelphia: we are social scientists who also understand the processes and practices of planning and permitting, urban design and landscape architecture, environmental impact review and public input/participation.

Dana H. Taplin, Ph.D., Managing Director

Dana Taplin, an urban planner and environmental psychologist, brings an interest in applied social research to ActKnowledge's practice in Theory of Change. Dr. Taplin is working to expand ActKnowledge's practice into research on public space and environment and is currently directing an evaluative study of schoolyard playgrounds for the Trust for Public Land's New York City Playgrounds program. In 2007-08, Dr. Taplin played a key role for ActKnowledge in developing a Theory of Change for Lumina Foundation for Education's work in the higher education sector. Dr. Taplin's research interest is in parks and other public community spaces as social environments. He is skilled in the use of ethnographic research methods to understand how culture, social relations, and experiential values may be embodied in physical space. Dana served as Co-Director of the Public Space Research Group with Professor Setha Low, where he directed an ethnographic overview and assessment of the Fire Island, N.Y., National Seashore, and a community impact study of Battery Park City in Manhattan ten months after the attacks of 9/11/01. Dr. Taplin is second author, with Setha Low and Suzanne Scheld, of *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity*, published in November 2005 by the University of Texas Press. As an urban planner Dr. Taplin developed land-use plans, site plans and siting studies, worked with landscape architects on streetscape improvements, and prepared environmental impact statements and permitting reviews. Dr. Taplin has taught environmental studies at Pace University and also taught for several years in the Interior Design program at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

Heléne Clark, Ph.D., Founder and Director

An urban geographer and environmental psychologist, Heléne Clark works with organizations engaged in social change to build their capacity to develop clear goals, gather knowledge about results, and expand the impact of critical social interventions. Dr. Clark and Robert Engle founded ActKnowledge to provide rigorous research, planning and organizational development skills to the social sector. She has been the lead evaluator on numerous initiatives and served as advisor to many other evaluations around the U.S. She incorporated the "Theory of Change" methodology into ActKnowledge's work, and has led ActKnowledge to be the preeminent developer, facilitator and trainer of this method. Her international work includes the development of not-for-profit organizations in Moscow, social housing in Brazil and various projects in the United Kingdom. Heléne has served on the Board of Directors of Housing Conservation Coordinators in New York City for eight years. Prior to founding ActKnowledge, Dr. Clark was Associate Director of the Center for Human Environments, and taught courses in urban and economic geography, environmental psychology, housing policy and research methods. She has published widely on housing and community development policy topics, as well as education and youth development.

Other ActKnowledge staff include Julie Poncelet, a doctoral student completing her Ph.D. in the Built Environment Program at the University of Washington. From 2002 to 2005, Ms. Poncelet was a City Planner with the Philadelphia City Planning Commission and an adjunct professor at Temple University's Department of Geography and Urban Studies. Kira Krenichyn's interests include the ways that urban environments support health, well-being, and development. Kira researches play and recreation spaces for children and youth, women's uses of an urban park for sports and fitness, the effects of comprehensive community initiatives, and tenant ownership programs in New York City.

Public Space Projects

- Schoolyard Evaluation, Trust for Public Land-New York City Playground Project. In this project, ActKnowledge is conducting structured observations of use and users at three schoolyard playgrounds being transformed by the Trust from blacktopped yards to amenity-rich community parks. Through pre- and post-intervention observation, ActKnowledge is evaluating how the rebuilding of these schoolyards changes amount and variety of use, community involvement, and numbers of users.
- Ethnographic study with the National Park Service of community cultural values relating to the lands and waters of Fire Island National Seashore, 2003-05.
- Publication of the book *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity*, by Setha Low, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld, in November 2005, by the University of Texas Press.
- Grant application to National Endowment for the Humanities in 2005 for an historic preservation-inflected study of New Orleans neighborhoods after Hurricane Katrina to understand and describe the relationship between neighborhood life, place attachment, and the layout and character of the built environment.
- Rapid Ethnographic Assessment of park visitors and uses, Jacob Riis Park at Gateway National Recreation Area, 2000.
- Rapid Ethnographic Assessment at Battery Park City to study community life and change ten months after the destruction of the World Trade Center. Funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.
- User studies and visitor counts of Prospect Park, Pelham Bay Park, and Van Cortlandt Park, 1996-98.
- Needs Assessments at Floyd Bennett Field, Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, and Jacob Riis Park units of Gateway National Recreation Area, 1995. With the National Park Service.
- Rapid Ethnographic Assessment at Liberty State Park, Jersey City, and Battery Park in New York, with respect to a proposed footbridge to Ellis Island National Monument. With the National Park Service, 1994.
- Rapid Ethnographic Assessment at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, exploring relationships between established Philadelphia communities and the park, with the National Park Service, 1994-95.

