

# The Evolving Relationship Between Open Space Preservation and Local Planning Practice

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This work argues that open space has been utilized by local planning practice for numerous reasons that have reflected the shifting concerns of the planning profession since the nineteenth century. An intellectual movement that romanticized nature as distinct from social processes and a changing political economy made it possible for open space to serve an interventionist role in addressing social concerns. Consequently, open space has been used to address urban concerns of health and sanitation, suburban concerns of exclusionary zoning, and more recently, to protect ecological functions and guide urban development. This has prevented a more thorough examination of the relationship between nature and society.

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The use of open space as either a tool or normative goal of plan making has a long and complicated history in local planning practice. As an object of plan making, contemporary planners cite a myriad of justifications for incorporating open space into local plans. Open space preservation is construed and justified as serving social ends (parks, recreational ball fields, picnic areas) sustaining ecological systems (forest preserves, riparian greenways) or local economies (farmland preservation), or to protect quality of life (amenity creation or property-value protection) as part of a larger “smart growth” agenda. The inclusion of open space preservation into the plan making process also provides a powerful rhetorical tool, as plans are often justified based on the degree to which they incorporate or protect open space. At the local level, land is preserved as open space through a variety of innovative tools including large lot zoning, incentives, preferential tax assessment, fee simple acquisition, or conservation easement. Regardless of either the method or stated purpose of preservation, a

common theme that runs through any preservation agenda is the prevention of land from being developed.

This work argues that these multiple (and sometimes contradictory) justifications and roles reflect the changing concerns of the evolving planning profession since the nineteenth century. These concerns were influenced by intellectual elites who romanticized nature as possessing inherent moral value and as distinct from society, and as a response to a changing political economy. Conceptualizing natural processes as distinct and external from social processes has made it possible for open space to serve an interventionist role in planning practice. However, as David Schuyler points out in *The New Urban Landscape* (1986), this has allowed planners to appropriate open space as a means to address social concerns and as a response to changing socioeconomic and demographic patterns over time. For example, planners utilized open space during the progressive era to address urban concerns of health and sanitation through park provision. As suburban areas grew, often at the expense of cities, open space served exclusionary ends, particular through suburban zoning practices. More recently, open space has been preserved to protect ecological functions and guide urban development. The separation of social from natural processes has prevented a more thorough examination of the relationship between nature and society. This is problematic as it allows open space to serve specific interests and has exacerbated tension over what constitutes open space.

### The Changing Nature of American Antiurbanism

Preventing land from being developed is often a key argument for preserving open space. This has consequently been justified and defended by tapping into popular antiurban sentiment, which is generally attributed as originating in England. Robert Fishman attributes English rejection of cities (initially by the wealthy) and consequent suburbanization as primarily a “cultural creation” beginning in the eighteenth century, which reflected changing family structure and patterns of domestication.<sup>1</sup> This movement coincided with the romantic movement in the arts and literature that eschewed rationality in favor of a more organic “naturalism.” Central to this movement was the preservation of natural features and a celebration of what was perceived to be the “natural” English countryside (itself not natural), which the wealthy went to great lengths to emulate.

American intellectuals and elites, from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright, have famously been dismissive of cities. This antiurban intellectual tradition is the subject of Morton and Lucia White’s influential book, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (1977). Their basic argument is that the lack of a traditional romantic attachment to the city has pervaded all levels of intellectual, social, and political thought to the present day. Jefferson himself has come to personify the yearning for an “agrarian ideal,” consisting

of independent, property owning yeoman farmers. This ideal was “predicated on the political belief that farmers possessed the independence that would guarantee the survival of the nation’s republican institutions.”<sup>2</sup> The extension of this argument is that as the majority of urban dwellers were propertyless, they therefore lacked the independence of their rural counterparts. Consequently, urban areas did not comport with the republican ideal.

In a sense, Morton and Lucia White are correct in stating that these ideals continue to inspire and guide intellectual and political decision making—the inherent rural bias of the current U.S. electoral system is just an example of this. However, as Schuyler points out, the agrarian ideology was transformed and came under revision during the nineteenth century. He notes that the Jeffersonian ideal is little more than a form of social organization. Nature serves as little more than the background for an agrarian economic system. As the nineteenth century progressed, industrial capitalism was rapidly altering the relationship between society and nature. City dwellers were becoming increasingly detached from contact with nature, as modes of production became mechanized and wage labor became prevalent. Furthermore, it became clear that the assumed agrarian stability and self-sustaining yeoman farmer was giving way to a market economy, agricultural commercialization, and an increasingly mobile rural population, as homesteaders moved west in search of new lands. In short, agriculture itself was becoming a speculative venture, much like other sectors of the economy.

Consequently, traditional agriculture as a moral force was increasingly replaced in the intellectual, artistic, and popular imagination by romantic landscapes, and an appreciation for natural scenery and untouched wilderness as a source for contemplation, morality, and spiritual renewal. The appreciation of the wilderness made its way into American culture first through an intellectual elite that drew on English romanticism and the picturesque style.<sup>3</sup> As the nineteenth century progressed, wilderness preservation became an influential movement, and wilderness was celebrated in paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, and the Hudson River School, as well as the writings of James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau, and John Ruskin, whose writings were particularly influential in equating morality with nature.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the traditional Jeffersonian urban critique was subtly altered. No longer was an agrarian economic system seen as the cause for morality and civic virtue but rather the lack of contact with nature in urban areas was the problem. Following this logic, “the absence of nature in cities was the source of poor health, poor morals, and insanity.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Antiurbanism Within Context**

These changing perceptions were not isolated incidents or merely expressions of an elite-driven intellectual climate. Rather they were the

manifestation of larger transitions in the political economy. In his work *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams discusses the changing perception of both country and city throughout centuries as reflected in English literature. Commenting on changing perceptions of the city, he notes the following:

We have to notice the regular sixteenth- and seventeenth-century association of ideas of the city with money and law, the eighteenth-century association with wealth and luxury; the persistent association, reaching a climax in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, with the mob and the masses; the nineteenth- and twentieth-century association with mobility and isolation.<sup>6</sup>

He notes also that over time, the country has also radically altered its associations, from savage and wild to settlement and cultivation (i.e., the Jeffersonian ideal) to the idea of a rural retreat (an association that assumes mobility) and unspoiled nature. James Machor points out that these associations (and consequent tensions) are predicated on the conviction that city and country embody diametrically opposed values, something which has been “affirmed, explicitly or implicitly, by social, intellectual, and literary historians.”<sup>7</sup>

Williams makes several observations which impinge on this discussion. First, he argues that associations of nature are rooted within their historical context and are largely a response to changes in the political economy. For example, he notes that although certain themes endure (such as the association of capital with the city), others, such as isolation, are relatively new phenomena, emerging only as a major theme during the industrialized phase of urban development during the nineteenth century. This is also the period that coincides with the shift in the American agrarian ideal that I have been describing.

Second, Williams concludes that perceptions have less to do with the actual country or city per se than with a response “to a whole way of life largely determined elsewhere.”<sup>8</sup> Williams concludes that associations of city and country therefore depend more on “class variations” than on any objective reality of city or country. I would extend this analysis by noting that those who were promulgating a romantic image of an untamed, morally righteous nature were largely urban-based intellectuals. As Roderick Nash states in his classic study, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, “appreciation of wilderness began in the cities.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, in a sense, country and city were trying to be what the other already was. As Schuyler notes,

Settlers on the frontier employed the rectangular street plan to convey at least the appearance of urban civilization, while residents of cities on the eastern seaboard attempted, through the creation of public parks and suburbs, to restore aspects of the countryside.<sup>10</sup>

Third, Williams finds that complaints of rural change have long followed similar lines. Residents of rural areas, no matter their particular class affiliation or time period, tend to resist changes in their (largely constructed) way of life. In resisting what is often perceived of as “imposed” change, similar arguments have been invoked throughout history, in particular, bemoaning the destruction of local community or indifference on the part of the outside (urban) world to the settled or customary ways of rural areas.

We can draw several conclusions about the popular conceptualization of nature and wilderness, which had emerged by the middle of the nineteenth century. A transformation in American antiurbanism, itself a product of a shifting political economy and borrowed ideas, promulgated a conception of nature filled with romantic images and nostalgic emphasis of a pristine, untouched wilderness. Nature was no longer conceived of in the image of a rural economy but rather romanticized as the absence of urbanity and possessing inherent moral values. This conception tended to externalize nature as ontologically different from society and independent of social processes. As such, it comported well with existing enlightenment thinking, which tended to objectify nature and society as separate realities.

Despite this imagery, however, nature was, for the most part, interpreted through an urban lens. It is only through urban eyes that the romanticized image of nature could be constructed. This set up a contradiction. While nature was touted as ontologically distinct—the opposite of society—it was not nature per se that was of interest but rather its relationship with society and cities. Therefore, nature was susceptible to various interpretations which reflected the values of those doing the conceptualizing or revealed changes in the political economy rather than any sort of objective reality of nature itself.<sup>11</sup>

Given this context, it is therefore not a stretch to envision nature, or that component of nature I am concerned with—land, being appropriated to serve an interventionist role in addressing a variety of social and economic issues, from nineteenth-century concerns of urban immigration and rapid industrialization to twentieth-century concerns over suburban sprawl and quality of life. An interventionist role for open space benefits greatly from a conceptualization of nature as distinct or external from social processes. Such a conceptualization tends to identify nature as objective and free from social or political processes, often without a critical examination of the role open space serves in the planning profession.

### **The Planning Profession and Open Space**

The nascent field of planning, which arose in the late nineteenth century, coincided with a period of rapid industrialization, political corruption, increased immigration, overcrowding, squalor, and perceived moral

decay that characterized industrialized cities. Influenced by technological advances, scientific intervention into social decision making, and the belief that a pleasant environment would foster healthy, responsible citizens, early planners and civic reformers incorporated open space and built environment in two different ways. The first was inherently social and inclusive (urban parks), and the second focused on exclusivity (suburban residential development).<sup>12</sup>

The urban park movement embodied the interventionist role of nature serving as a means to address society's moral concerns: if lack of exposure to nature was the source of society's ills, then increasing exposure was surely the cure. Landscape Architect, Charles Eliot, equated the urban environment with vice and the degradation of society, noting that society had a patriotic and moral responsibility to address these conditions. In an address in Providence, Rhode Island, he noted the following:

Our cities are our hotbeds of vice and crime. The herding of the very poor in city slums breeds a degraded race. The lack of opportunity for innocent recreation drives hundred to amuse themselves in ways that are not innocent. . . . Civilization is not safe so long as any part of the population is morally or physically degraded; and if such degradation is increasing in our great towns. . . it is plainly the duty and the interest of all who love their country to do what they can to check the drift. If the experience of other cities has scientifically proved that certain improvements are sources of physical and financial advantage to the cities which introduce them, you cannot longer afford to do without them.<sup>13</sup>

In reaction to the monotonous grid-iron development, squalor, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions of the industrializing city, a broad coalition of social reformers, physicians, civic leaders, landscape designers, and wealthy philanthropists envisioned the creation of large, civilized, public parks as a means both of integrating social classes and new immigrants as well as addressing the overcrowding and lack of sanitary conditions in the industrialized city.

The chief design team of New York's Central Park consisted of Frederick L. Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Although remembered as the father of the landscape architecture profession, Olmsted saw himself largely as a social reformer, concerned more with achieving social change through an aesthetic experience.<sup>14</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, a contemporary of Olmsted and a fellow landscape architect who had originally proposed the creation of a 500-acre "People's Park" for New York, saw in a park the ability to raise up "the working men to the same level of enjoyment with the man of leisure and accomplishment."<sup>15</sup> Olmsted was influenced by the architectural critics, such as John Ruskin, who identified beauty in art and nature with morality and religion. It is in Ruskin's writing that he found support for the thesis that beauty, "and particularly the beauty of natural landscape scenery—must be the means to improve the quality of life."<sup>16</sup>

The social objectives of the park were three-fold. First, it would serve as the “lungs of the city,”<sup>17</sup> providing access to cleaner air and a break in the monotony of the gridiron streets pattern. A landmark 1845 study titled *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York* by John Griscom expressed concerns over health conditions of the urban poor and called for improved sanitary regulations, a public water supply, public control of building design, and increased access to open space.<sup>18</sup> Olmsted argued that “air is disinfected by sunlight and foliage” and parks would serve to “supply the lungs with air screened and purified by trees, and recently acted upon by sunlight.”<sup>19</sup> Advocate for the City Beautiful movement, lecturer, and author John Nolen commented the following: “They (parks) contribute to the pleasure and health of the urban population more than any other recreational feature, and furnish the most necessary and available antidote to the artificiality, confusion and feverishness of life in cities.”<sup>20</sup> Those who advocated for wilderness preservation and the establishment of a National Park system appropriated similar arguments about the healing power of nature to advance their cause.<sup>21</sup>

A similar effort to integrate open space provision with public health reform was the playground movement, which originated in Boston in the mid-1880s. Playground advocates argued that recreation could improve the mental, moral, and physical well-being of children. Charles Hughes, governor of New York, put it most succinctly in an address to the 2nd annual congress of the Playground Association of America: “We want playgrounds for our own children into order that we may conserve the health of our people.”<sup>22</sup> In defending the health benefits of parks, Charles Eliot approvingly cited Dr. William Pepper of Philadelphia, who noted that a recent decline in the city death rate was in part because of “opportunities given even the poorest citizens for the enjoyment of pure air in Fairmount Park.”<sup>23</sup> Initially dependent on philanthropists to donate land, progressive reformers argued that it was the state’s responsibility to provide for this necessity:

In as much as public education is now recognized as a proper function for public support, and playgrounds are a necessity for the well being of children, we believe that they should be on land owned by the city, and also that they should be operated at the expense of the city.”<sup>24</sup>

Second, urban parks would act as a civilizing influence on the urban immigrant masses. Like other reformers of his day, Olmsted was an environmental determinist who believed that design could affect social behavior, and he argued that English landscaped parks would elevate both the character and condition of the lower classes. He believed that his parks would exercise “an immediate and very striking education influence” that would “soon manifest itself in certain changes to taste and of habits, consequently in the requirements of the people.”<sup>25</sup> Charles Eliot noted that not only the physical health of the population would improve but also their moral well-being, as well:

The removal of the children from the crowded streets to the quiet playgrounds, and the gathering of the neighbors from their narrow homes into the neat public squares when the labor of day is over, has worked in many places something like a moral revolution. Whoever has visited even one of the numerous public squares of Paris, Berlin, or Vienna, and has then watched the bearing and behavior of the common people, will ever afterward be an earnest advocate of public gardens.<sup>26</sup>

Third, parks would have larger consequences for civil society in general. Olmsted dismissed fixed class-based cultural divisions and was convinced of the value of class intermixing, arguing that parks (among other public institutions) will “be so attractive as to force into contact the good and bad, the gentlemanly and the rowdy.”<sup>27</sup> In particular, he noted with pride of both Central Park and Prospect Park in Brooklyn: “All classes largely represented, with a common purpose. . . [y]ou may thus often see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile.”<sup>28</sup> Noting that parks had fostered “social freedom, and an easy and agreeable intercourse of all classes” in an otherwise monarchical Europe, Downing professed that the provision of green space was “worth imitating in our more professedly democratic country.”<sup>29</sup>

John Nolen expanded on this topic by expanding on the link between democracy and recreational open space:

We need to make recreation more democratic. . . we need to make improvements which are for the benefit and enjoyment of everybody for the common good. . . [I]n political rights we have democracy enough. . . [B]ut we should now work for a wider democracy of recreation, for more opportunity to enjoy those forms of beauty and pleasure which feed and refresh the soul as bread does the body!<sup>30</sup>

Incorporating nature into the urban environment would therefore have the effect of civilizing society.

However, Olmsted felt that the public was not ready for such an endeavor and would therefore need to be educated: “A large part of the people of New York are ignorant of a park, properly so called. They need to be trained in the proper use of it.”<sup>31</sup> He was wary of grass roots participation and enforced a strict code of conduct and behavior in Central Park, which put him at odds with labor groups and social organizations that wished to use the park to rally.<sup>32</sup> John Nolen commented that the planning and provision of open spaces should be controlled by experts:

But few even of the more progressive communities appear yet to understand. . . that these open spaces. . . should be selected and developed by experts. . . and that failure to appreciate this fact. . . amounts to great waste and inefficiency in our public grounds.<sup>33</sup>

Whether or not these early parks were successful in addressing each of these objectives is another question. Historians have increasingly scrutinized the lofty ambitions of early reformers. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar note that working classes were not represented in



Central Park “in anything approaching their percentage of the population. Moreover different classes tended to use the park on different days of the week, at different times of year, and in different ways.”<sup>34</sup> In short, the park was contested space.

### Nature as Middle Landscape

The creation of an urban park system is inherently social, as it seeks to use nature to solve the perceived social problems of the day. However, it is not a great leap from recreating the country in the city to creating a true “middle” landscape, neither city nor country, yet combining elements of both. Therefore, open space was also appropriated by early planning efforts less for the lofty goals of social integration and urban reform, and more as means by which to separate residents from the perceived moral and physical decay of urban areas. This “middle” landscape (or perhaps we should address it for what it really is—suburban) was promulgated by its early defenders as a state of balance between man and nature, a celebration of scenic qualities and social values. This newly created environment carried with it moral force. Olmsted, an influential advocate of the suburbs claimed that they were “the most attractive, the most refined, the most soundly wholesome form of domestic life.”<sup>35</sup> Ironically perhaps, suburbanization was guided in part by progressive reform movements of the time, such as the Garden City movement, which advocated new towns surrounded by open fields as a means of addressing urban growth. Dolores Hayden argues that early suburbanization was partially influenced by various communitarian settlements, which sought to create model communities to “display material evidence of the superiority of their religious beliefs or political views.”<sup>36</sup>

The use of open space in suburban environments is characterized in a number of ways. First, through deliberate design intervention, early landscape architects and planners imposed an artificial and romanticized image of nature through application of English picturesque design principles, creating a built form that rejected the imposed rigidity of the cities, and emulated wild or natural beauty with irregular and broken lines. This was accomplished by incorporating winding streets instead of a gridiron pattern, the construction of appropriately styled “country” homes set back from the street, and the ubiquitous lawn. These design elements were appropriated as emblematic of the American wilderness.

However, as Virginia Jenkins notes, the “lawn” had no tradition in America (in fact, no perennial or pasture grasses existed which could have constituted a lawn) but rather “an elite eighteenth century English landscape tradition of lawns studded with trees was introduced into America in the latter part of that century. Wealthy Americans learned of the English

aristocratic tradition through books, paintings, and travel.”<sup>37</sup> Through their influence, this style was consciously and laboriously recreated and packaged as “natural” to prospective residents. For example, Downing recommended that his clients landscape in the “natural style”:

[T]hat is, with a view to the production of natural beauty. This is effected by planting the trees in irregular groups, or singly, in a manner somewhat similar to that in which they occur in nature, avoiding straight lines and parallel rows, because such lines indicate a formal art, never found in natural landscape.

Nevertheless, to raise landscaping to the level of an art form and maintain class distinction, Downing recommends distinguishing landscape design from appearing too natural:

At the same time, the effect will be not the less indicative of elegant art, which will be evinced 1st, In the employment of many exotic trees, or those obviously not natives of this part of the country. . . 2nd, In the space allowed for the trees to develop themselves fully in the lawn. . . and in more park-like forms. . . ; and 3rd, In the manner in which the trees are arranged. The latter consists in concealing all objects which would not add to the beauty of the scene.<sup>38</sup>

Downing also recommended a strict maintenance regime to keep up appearances:

As the lawn will be a great source of beauty in all places of this kind, it is important that attention should be paid to this feature. . . [N]o lawn will retain its freshness and verdure throughout our hot summers, unless particular attention is paid. . . Frequent mowing is necessary to insure that velvet-like appearance so much admired in English lawns.<sup>39</sup>

The English picturesque style did not remain the purview of the wealthy. Artists, writers, and magazines of the day popularized it. New landscape designers, such as Humphrey Repton, brought the picturesque and pastoral within reach of the middle class, by “miniaturizing” the great estate and “educating” the middle class to appreciate their skills.<sup>40</sup>

Second, it was an inherently exclusive landscape being created. Olmsted, who had prided himself on the ability of Central Park to bring together a different ethnic and socioeconomic groups, noted that suburbs generally consisted of the “more fortunate classes”<sup>41</sup> and had to confess about Riverside, his planned suburb of Chicago; “the laws of supply and demand compel me to work chiefly for the rich and to study rich men’s wants, fashions, and prejudices.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the ideal of a middle landscape took on exclusionary tones from the very beginning of the planned suburb. As Robert Fishman summarizes “Olmsted’s picturesque aesthetic and his attempt to envision a truly civilized community cannot be disentangled from the equally pressing aim of creating a tightly knit, exclusive society that would enjoy forever the unique benefits of its affluence.”<sup>43</sup> Riverside quickly attracted the affluent,

who chose to abandon the city for the promises of suburban life. Similarly, Dolores Hayden argues that nineteenth-century-communitarian model settlements quickly lost their intent as “the quest for spirituality and new forms of community were replaced by the routines of buying into a leafy place with big houses and affluent neighbors” with residents turning instead to “exclusivity without any community activities.”<sup>44</sup> She concludes that as housing is tied to the larger political economy, attempts to address social problems through model communities have always fallen.

Third, early suburbanization involved the abandoning of the city by the upper classes, and hence, the industrialized world they had created, and were, to a large extent, still dependent on. Peter Schmitt notes that the development of the rural aesthetic was dependent on urban, industrial capital: “The. . . Romantic’s distaste for city life was tempered. . . by the need for money to finance the ease of a ‘country gentleman’.”<sup>45</sup> David Pepper also notes that the popularization of nature was largely a product of “those who lived in cities or whose family money came from industrial capital. Such elitist romanticism. . . favored noble simplicity over an industrial complexity, feeling over rationality, and aesthetics over utilitarianism.”<sup>46</sup>

### Open Space and Suburban Exclusion

However, the privatization of open space provision in suburban environments required more than romantic sentimentality. Land is not intrinsically exclusionary but rather required legal and bureaucratic formalization as part of the planning process. During the early decades of the twentieth century, open space became formally legalized and institutionalized through suburban zoning and land use regulation. Using standardized collective controls—building codes, master plans, and zoning ordinances (in particular the minimum lot size), municipalities were able to confer on nature exclusionary properties, namely an ability to separate. In short, nature became urbanized.

At the time, it was not evident that such regulatory intervention was possible, much to the chagrin of urban progressive reformers who saw regulation of the built environment as a means of improving the physical and mental conditions of the urban poor, much like urban parks. John Nolen, writing in 1915, noted that

public opinion was not, and in fact is not yet favorable to the strict public regulation and control of the laying out of residential neighborhoods. It is indeed very difficult to make an advance, even in sanitary requirements, in measures for the reduction of fire hazard, in the reasonable protection of light and air.<sup>47</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, the development of exclusionary suburban landscapes was largely undertaken through either restrictive covenants or

deed restrictions, which determined house style, minimal construction cost, and the race or religion of subsequent property owners. Olmsted was one of the first to fear encroachment on his beloved picturesque suburban villas and advocated for “new concepts of city planning” that promoted the separation of discrete districts.<sup>48</sup> He realized that distance alone could not prevent encroachment, and he argued that what was needed was “to offer some assurance to those who wish to build villas that these districts shall not be by and by invaded by the desolation which has thus far invariably advanced before the progress of the town.”<sup>49</sup>

The use of restrictions, initially contested, soon became widely popular and a standard practice. In an address at the 5th annual convention of the National Association of Real Estate Exchange, J. C. Nichols, developer of the Country Club district of Kansas City noted how a greater understanding of the relationship between open space and exclusion led to a change in attitude and perception; “In the beginning, I did not feel we could afford to set aside the low and broken lands for parks and boulevards; now we are paying enormous prices for the privilege of affording our customers these parks.” Moreover, this relationship was not limited to public open spaces, but private lots as well:

We now restrict certainly tracts of our land in 200 foot lots, 200–300 feet deep to \$10,000–\$25,000 homes, and find the more restrictions we can put upon, the more that property is sought by those wishing to build permanent residences. When we first began to elaborate upon restrictions which would safeguard the beauty and permanence of the home. . . in detail, we were accused of transgressing upon property rights, and attempting to dictate the family affairs of our purchasers.<sup>50</sup>

As this became common knowledge, Nichols noted the manner in which he advertised changed dramatically:

It was a long step from my first advertisement, which read “25-foot lots, 90 feet deep, no city taxes,” to advertising which read “spacious ground for permanently protected homes, surrounded with ample space for air and sunshine—among flowers, grass and shrubbery, all expressive of the owners ideas of beauty, health, and comfort.”<sup>51</sup>

Zoning became more prevalent during the 1920s. Changing demographics and rapid urban expansion in the later nineteenth century led to an increased demand for greater state intervention in the structuring of urban space.<sup>52</sup> The architect George Ford addressed the National Conference of City Planning in 1924 noting that 250 towns and cities across the United States had adopted zoning and commented approvingly on its popularity:

Not one community that has once passed a zoning ordinance has revoked it. Not one city that has yet reported a case where the passage of a zoning ordinance has decreased any property values. . . [t]hat property owner appreciate zoning is

evidenced by the fact that they are proving very jealous of its invasion and they often throng hearing to protect their rights as established through zoning.<sup>53</sup>

Despite its urban origins, it is in suburban communities that zoning began to take on the scope and role with which we now identify it. Zoning was used by municipalities to address common environmental concerns through the privatization of open space:

Zoning . . . aims to enforce fair play in the development and use of property by requiring all owners to contribute to the yards and open space of the neighborhood and thus prevent any owner from unduly cutting off or monopolizing the community's common stock of light and air.<sup>54</sup>

More importantly, however, the particular American method of subdividing a parcel into individual lots allowed developers and municipalities to fine-tune the zoning process by determining the minimum lot size. As Peter Abeles (1989) states the following

Zoning and suburban America grew together. . . . [F]rom the simple one- or two-family zone of the 1920's ordinances, it was soon found that one could [create value difference] between a single family house on a 5,000-square foot lot and one that was on a 7,500-square foot lot.<sup>55</sup>

Rutherford Platt argues that the minimum lot size equated open space amenity provision with the creation of exclusionary environments: "Through minimum lot size requirements, local zoning privatized and enshrined the amenity function of open space, degrading it into an icon of white, upper-middle-class exclusivity."<sup>56</sup> Through zoning, the municipality was able to control not only the physical design but also the type of people moving into the town by in essence, forcing each new homeowner to purchase a minimum amount of nature, in the form of a culturally appropriate yard.

The landmark 1926 Supreme Court case, *Euclid, Ohio v. Ambler Realty Co.*, established zoning as legal tool for planners and municipalities. Proponents defended it as a valid exercise of a municipality's police power. In the majority opinion, Chief Justice Sutherland invoked nature as integral to zoning, when he designated one of the goals of zoning to "preserve a more favorable environment."<sup>57</sup> The ambiguity of his language intrigues because it leaves open interpretations over what exactly constitutes a "favorable environment." Filing an amicus brief on behalf of the village of Euclid, land use lawyer Alfred Bettman argued that "[Z]oning has. . . this purpose of promoting public health, order, safety, convenience, and morals by the promotion of favorable environmental conditions in which people live and work."<sup>58</sup> The equation of "environment" with "quality of life" as well as the amorphous interpretation of "favorable environmental conditions" continues today.

## The Rise of Environmentalism

Nevertheless, although often misinterpreted as such, zoning and land regulation are not planning. Indeed, relatively early on, it was clear that zoning was being misused. Although a defender of zoning, Alfred Bettman lamented the imposition of zoning control without proper planning, arguing that any zoning regulation should be based on "scientific study."<sup>59</sup> At a 1931 American City Planning Institute Conference, Martin Knowles commented the following:

Experience has proved what should have been self evident from the beginning—that subdivision control is merely one of the tools with which to work in city planning; that in many ways it is an imperfect tool; and in any event is one which requires skill to properly use.<sup>60</sup>

However, in the years after World War II, open space preservation once again took center stage as both an object and method of local planning practice. Whether preserved as a park or codified into suburban zoning, preservation became subsumed within the larger environmental movement, which reached maturity during the 1970s.

Gottlieb interprets the rise of the environmental movement as part of a complex of social movements that arose in response to rapid industrialization and urbanization following World War II; a reaction to changes both in the mode of production (the chemical revolution, development of atomic energy, and proliferation of synthetic material) and consumption (massive-scale housing construction).<sup>61</sup> Concern for the environment introduced a new "ecosystem" rationale for the preservation of open space. It was now to be preserved and used because it served specific ecosystem functions which were considered vital and important to life on earth. As planner S.B. Zisman wrote in 1965, "The great issue in planning is not where to build, but where not to build."<sup>62</sup>

One of the most enduring impacts of the environmental movement has been the backlash against the idea of nature as something to be dominated or controlled by mankind. In its place, the environmental movement offered a more "ecocentric" view of the relationship between society and nature.<sup>63</sup> This interpretation rejected the dominance of society over nature and instead urged a fundamental respect for nature. Landscape Architect Ian McHarg rejected earlier interpretations of nature as providing primarily social functions and instead saw nature in terms of its ability to sustain all life: "Clearly the problem of man and nature is not one of providing a decorative background for the human play, or even ameliorating the grim city: it is the necessity of sustaining nature as a source of life."<sup>64</sup> Another Landscape Architect, Michael Hough, is in fact dismissively of what he refers to as "formal" or designed (as opposed to natural) open space:

These two contrasting landscapes, the formalistic and the natural, the pedigreed and the vernacular, symbolize an inherent conflict of environmental values. The first has little connection with the dynamics of natural processes. Yet it has traditionally been held in high public value as an expression of care, aesthetic value and civic spirit. The second represents the vitality of altered but nonetheless functioning natural and social processes at work in the city. Yet it is regarded as a derelict wasteland in need of urban renewal.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the shifting emphasis in society's relation to nature, however, the use of open space either to address social concerns or to protect ecological processes required the externalization of nature as distinct from society and independent of social processes. In fact, the environmental movement greatly benefited from a conception of natural processes as distinct from social processes, particular in its prioritization of scientific knowledge in the preservation decision-making process.

### Postwar Environmentalism and Suburbanization

The environmental movement was not simply the purview of grassroots activists but quickly achieved mainstream acceptability, which I attribute to a number of factors. The first and most obvious reason for the growth of mainstream environmentalism was the plainly visible environmental ravages of industrial capitalism, such as the Cuyahoga River in Ohio catching fire on multiple occasions between the 1930s and 1960s.<sup>66</sup> Events such as these captured national attention and are attributed to a number of regulatory activities such as the Clean Water Act.

Second, there was an increase in the number of professions that examined nature as a scientific pursuit. A number of diverse fields, including ecology, civil engineering, geology, hydrology, and landscape architecture began to scientifically study the role that natural processes and features such as wetlands and aquifer recharge zones played in sustaining life.<sup>67</sup>

Third, the popularization of ecological thinking brought ecological issues to national attention. Books such as Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring* brought ecological ideas and aesthetics into the mainstream of American life. William Whyte's *The Last Landscape* examined innovative planning tools available to preserve open space. This postwar trend culminated with the publication of Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature*, which combined the fields of ecology and planning together as a comprehensive system of sustainable development.

Fourth, a new policy environment made state and federal funding available for open space acquisition. A 1960 study by the Regional Plan Association of New York titled *The Race for Open Space* concluded that the metropolitan area was in a race with private economic forces for increasingly scarce open land, much of which should be preserved as soon as possible. Action at both the state and federal level soon followed. Unlike earlier

Federal efforts at land acquisition during the Depression that focused primarily on preservation as an economic development tool, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, created by Congress in 1964, provided matching grants to States and local governments for the acquisition and development of public open space. Criteria for acquisition ranged from recreational qualities to wildlife habitat to protecting scenic vistas. State-level programs, such as New Jersey's Green Acres program, were also initiated. Similar arguments were often extended to agricultural land also threatened by encroaching suburban growth. Local and statewide efforts to protect farmland were often defended using similar rhetoric.

Fifth, the preservation of nature increasingly became associated as an indicator of suburban quality of life. As the majority of postwar growth and development occurred in the suburbs, the focus of planning shifted from the largely urban concerns of sanitation, congestion, and overcrowding to more suburban concerns of property value protection and enhancement of quality of life. Critics of development increasingly relied on environmental reasons, such as the loss of open space and farmland, the fragmentation of natural habitat, and broader concerns over air and water quality in their effort to implement growth management legislation. This shift placed the suburban homeowner as a defender of environmentalism, with some scholars attributing the rise of the environmental movement itself to the growth of postwar suburbia.<sup>68</sup> Several landscape architects have made open space preservation the central theme of subdivision designs.<sup>69</sup>

Increasingly, "natural" open space was the object of local preservation efforts. This was a marked departure from the past, as preserving wilderness areas had traditionally been the domain of the Federal government and municipalities seen as providers of more social open space. Local preservation advocates used a benign language that emphasized the environmental aspects of preserving land, or portrayed nature as a means to maintain a municipality's rural character or sense of place. As such arguments purport to serve natural goals, they benefit greatly from the perception of nature as objective and beyond the realm of the social.

### **Local Planning Practice and Ecosystem Protection**

Environmentally driven open space preservation is predicated on the notion that nature provides certain ecoservices that would normally be undervalued in the private land market, and unless protected, would be unable to compete with urban land uses. The private land market would undervalue ecoservices because of the inherent difficulty of pricing biodiversity, ground water infiltration area, impervious surfaces, species habitat, and a whole range of amenities which society benefits from in the long run. By protecting landscape that provides public goods, open space preservation



is ensuring something which the private sector would otherwise not provide. Ian McHarg was an early advocate of relating open space preservation and ecological functions, and basing preservation decisions not so much on land's social value but rather on sound science:

There is need for an objective and systematic method of identifying and evaluating land most suitable for metropolitan open space based on the natural roles that it performs. These roles can best be understood by examining the degree to which natural processes perform work for man without his intervention, and by studying the protection which is afforded and values which are derived when certain of these lands are undisturbed.<sup>70</sup>

According to McHarg, planners versed in scientific arguments and ecological rationales for preservation would greatly enhance the justifications for open space protection: "The arguments for providing open space in the metropolitan region, usually dependent on amenity alone, can be substantially reinforced if policymakers understand and appreciate the operation of the major physical and biological processes at work."<sup>71</sup>

Rapid growth in suburban and exurban fringe areas and the expanded need to protect wetlands and aquifer recharge areas demanded new, more intense approaches to protect nature. The focus of the planning profession shifted to controlling or managing growth. In the 1970s, growth management was primarily concerned with controlling growth. Since then, it has evolved into a more broadly focused planning and governmental approach aimed at coordinating the development process. This is noted by the change in discourse from that of "growth controls" to the more positive "smart growth." As it is understood today, growth management uses planning, policy, and regulatory techniques to influence the allocation and distribution of new development across a designated area.<sup>72</sup> Arthur Nelson identifies a primary objective of smart growth as directing development "to where facilities could serve it, and away from open spaces that society desired to preserve."<sup>73</sup>

Environmental justifications have greatly expanded the scope, role, and actors involved in local open space preservation, as well greatly expanded the definition of what is meant by open space, and the criteria used in selecting land to preserve. Under the rubric of growth management or smart growth, a range of innovative planning tools have been developed and used to protect and incorporate open space. These range from more traditional regulatory approaches, such as cluster zoning or large lot zoning, to incentive-based approaches, such as right-to-farm laws or preferential tax assessment, to direct public acquisition, which includes the transfer of development rights, conservation easement (purchase of development rights), and fee simple acquisition.<sup>74</sup> The actors involved in local preservation have also changed. Although municipalities are still active, as demonstrated by the recent growth in state and local referenda on open space preservation,<sup>75</sup> increasingly private land trust have become involved in local preservation, whether it be through direct acquisition, or education.<sup>76</sup> The result has been

overlapping ownership and multiple public–private partnerships involved in protecting open space.

## Conclusion

The preservation of open space continues to be used as both a means and an end, often simultaneously, of planning practice. In a review of open space preservation, Platt notes that “definite chronological divides may not easily be drawn, and individual sites usually serve more than one purpose”<sup>77</sup> The creation of public open space in urban areas continues, and in fact has increased in recent years because of changes in zoning ordinances and other incentives, albeit through the private sector.<sup>78</sup> Suburban open space provision has become more exclusive through the introduction of common-interest developments and gated communities. Moreover, environmentally motivated acquisition is no longer a solely a suburban undertaking. Increasingly, degraded urban environments are restored and reclaimed, under the premise that nature can and often does flourish in such environments.<sup>79</sup> Open space preservation and provision is increasingly dominated by the private sector, through either corporations or land trusts. This has greatly increased the amount of open space but has raised issues regarding ownership and public accessibility. In short, the typology of local open space preservation and the manner in which local planners are involved has become increasing complex and less easy to characterize.

Nevertheless, despite the variety of tools and justifications used in preserving open space, the actors involved in preservation, or whether open space is to be used for social or environmental ends, the externalization of nature as distinct from society and independent of social processes has prevented planners, politicians, developers, citizens, and society in general from addressing the complex and intricate manner in which society and nature overlap. Referring to Locke’s famous invocation of natural rights in defense of private property, Williams (1980) notes that society and nature have always been intermingled: “Once we begin to speak of people mixing their labor with the earth, we are in a whole world of new relations between people and nature and to separate natural history from social history becomes extremely problematic.”<sup>80</sup>

Thus, the frequent habit of referring to nature as a domain which is nonsocial is not only misleading but could add legitimacy to statements which serve specific interests and lead to the “perpetuation of power and inequality.”<sup>81</sup> Arguments about the environmental benefits of preserving nature can often be applied to serve exclusionary ends. For example, local municipalities often engage in downzoning, or increasing the minimum residential lot size, on the grounds of minimizing the environmental impacts of urbanization.

However, exclusionary consequences of such activities are rarely brought into consideration.

Furthermore, observational statements made about what is considered “natural” open space tend to reinforce a number of dualisms: rural–urban, country–city, wilderness–civilization, depending on the perspective of the observer.<sup>82</sup> For example, rural, suburban, and urban constituencies often disagree over what qualifies as open space, particularly when it comes to issues of preservation funding. Given the multiple and simultaneous roles often served by open space, there is often considerable debate and confusion over what exactly constitutes nature within the context of local planning efforts. Environmental groups and municipal officials often clash over the correct definition of “open space.” Planning priority is often given to landscapes described and referred to as “natural,” which are in fact highly constructed and have been altered and manipulated so much as to render them utterly unrecognizable from their original conditions.

Lastly, the denial of any social relation to the environment often simplifies the discourse concerning nature to a form of economic reductionism, which is largely born out in attempts to “prove” the economic benefit of nature. A wide ranging literature has evolved to ascertain the property enhancement or use values of nature through the application of cost–benefit analyses, fiscal impact studies, contingent valuation, and willingness-to-pay methodologies.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, justifications for planning intervention on the part of preserving nature frequently rely on economic efficiency arguments. This is unfortunate, as the convergence of the environmental movement and the more recent turn in local planning toward smart growth and sustainable practice presents the promise of a more integrated conceptualization of planning and open space.

## NOTES

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3. P.J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 56–9.

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9. R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 45.

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