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Author:

[Lyndon, Donlyn](#)

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Reimagining Places: Parks

We turn in this issue to thinking again about parks, places that are fixtures in our understanding of cities, but which too frequently elude our attention. Samina Quraeshi, as Guest Editor, has worked with the Project for Public Places to construct an issue that brings to light the ingenuity and stewardship that have made great parks part of our lives, and which seeks to reveal important prospects for reimagining their forms and place in society.

Many of the authors in this issue instinctively call forth childhood recollections of distinct places; moments that have been inscribed in their understandings — waiting, like delicate stone carvings, to be revealed by rubbing; moments that, when shared, help us discern potential and see beyond the confines of the immediate. What does a place do for us? What does it mean? What about it has penetrated into our consciousness, and what has seeped into our daily lives and given them structure?

The first step in reimagining a place is to be alert to its cadences, to listen to the beat of the lives that course through it. Places have an underlying structure that sets a rhythm and pace of encounter, that modulates the ways in which we relate to each other and to elements of the world. Cities are built upon such structures — patterns of thought and action translated into earthly bricks and mortar, or steel and glass that challenge the sky; into sparkling lights and hidden channels, clusters of vegetation and towering branches; into surfaces that are banked, leveled and smoothed for action. Parks are similarly founded — usually understood as green and unencumbered, nature pictorialized and furnished, places of both refuge and assembly.

The second step in reimagining is to unsettle assumptions, to challenge the certainties surrounding a place — or the ways we inhabit it. What have our understandings been built on? How did we win them/receive them/have them thrust upon us? What more can we hear if we turn our attention another way, filter our perceptions through different veils, encounter a place in unexpected ways? How do our perceptions change if we give a place sustained and loving care — or if, perhaps, we upset it completely? Parks are vessels that may be filled with many meanings.

Why do we need to “reimagine” places in this way? What may be gained? Unavoidably over time, certain of our understandings slip and adjust, migrating unwittingly, while others gradually become mute, subsumed in routine expectation. But Good Places — even “a Great Good Place” like Central Park — can survive and expand in our lives and minds because imaginative people continually freshen our understanding of them.

Accordingly, this issue of *Places* poses three sources of inspiration: the transformation of ill-used or neglected spaces, the continued American search for an inclusive democracy of culture and use, and a new and serious engagement with ecology. In illustrating these themes, the stories that follow tell often of redemption by persistence. But they also tell of the fruits of rich reimagining, of crafting places that defy presumption and stereotype, and which reach into the store of evolving cultural patterns.

The smallest of places — even the most unlikely preserve that extends a natural strand through the city — bears the capacity for recreation and/or solace, even glory. There are many such stories waiting to be fashioned, inscriptions waiting to be revealed, places deserving of fresh imagination and care.