

OUT OF THE BOX

Green Spaces in Greater Lafayette

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Nature has always held significant power over humanity. It is deeply ingrained in our psyche, implanted by a million years in the forests of prehistoric Africa. Even after we descended from the trees and began to make a people of ourselves, we remained largely within its grasp. Humans pried themselves from this grasp gradually: trees gave way to clearings, clearings led to villages, villages to hamlets and the creation of cities. Very recently, however, within the last few centuries, a great shift has occurred. Humanity now has the capability to shape and define nature to suit its own purposes, and we've only just begun to decide what exactly those purposes are. This specialization is potently obvious in the city. As it expands and absorbs the surrounding nature, the citizens adapt the green space to suit the needs of the city and its populace. Conversely, as the citizens engage with the green space, they adapt to fulfill the roles such spaces create.

My museum focuses on two cities in particular and the natural spaces contained within. The cities of Lafayette and West Lafayette will serve as my galleries, and local parks, retreats, and simple lawns will serve as the exhibits. In creating this museum, I focused on the dynamic, back-and-forth relationships between the community and natural spaces. People create and maintain green spaces, and draw value from green spaces in return. What kind of benefits did locals draw from these spaces? How do the parks benefit the individual, or the community as a whole? Do these environments build up the community, or introduce unstable, even dangerous, elements? Such are the questions I had in mind when I approached the parks of Lafayette and West Lafayette, and these are the themes I hope to portray in the following exhibits.

Crime

The very elements that isolate green spaces from urban spaces also make them prime locations for crime, the underbelly of Lafayette's daily life. One of the largest features of parks that draw crime is their ambiguous "ownership." As Elizabeth

Groff, a member of the Department of Criminal Justice, states, "because parks are publicly owned, they are at the same time everyone's and no one's" (Groff & McCord, 2012). Lafayette and West Lafayette's parks are under ambiguous ownership. At the end of the day, the parks are owned by the city and maintained by the parks departments, but these people do not keep constant watch, as a homeowner would a lawn. As such, it is up to the surrounding neighborhoods to keep watch on the parks. Groff and McCord (2012) called this informal watch "eyes on the street." The more eyes on the street, the more potential witnesses to criminal activity. Many locals put a lot of faith in this informal system, possibly to the point of naivety.

Columbian Park highlights Lafayette's implicit trust in watchful neighbors. The park is located in downtown Lafayette, surrounded by residential neighborhoods. Dave, grandfather to a local girl named Gwen, had much to say about his trust in nearby residents. He told me a story about how he and Gwen had some sort of "disagreement." Gwen screamed her displeasure, "and someone from the park came out [and] made sure that things were ok, that she wasn't hurt or that she was stealing anything (personal communication, November 2, 2016)." Likewise, Rick and Janet Osborne, locals for 60 years, voiced their approval of the park's safety. Rick felt that this was due to the park's centrality and how "open" it was. "If you really try to do something, you're going to be seen, or someone is going to help you." Janet agreed wholeheartedly, stating that the park's safety was one of its biggest values (personal communication, November 2, 2016).

Jasmin and her mother, playing with Jasmin's toddler sons, offered a unique perspective of implicit trust. They had just arrived from Mexico and were visiting family in the city. In the meantime, Jasmin was giving her sons an opportunity to play in the American park. She and her mother lauded the park's safety, which was unlike the parks they had back home. When they were kids, they played out in the open, in the fields. Now, they said, there were childnappers about, and it wasn't safe to let kids play out in the open anymore, at least not at home. They felt that Columbian Park was much different. It was bigger and calmer—safe. In the end, they said the locals felt nicer, and that they could trust in the safety they provided (personal communication, November 2, 2016).

OUT OF THE BOX

According to City Data (“Lafayette, Indiana,” n.d.), the area around Columbian Park had one of the highest crime indexes in the city. There was a strange disconnection between the perceived safety of the park and the statistics of crime throughout the area. Cesar Nunoz, a local at the park with his son, noted the presence of police officers patrolling the park (personal communication, November 2, 2016). Yet, he did not consider their presence an indicator of danger, but rather as further evidence of the parks safety. Granted, Columbian Park is as safe as parks get. However, the local’s perception of the park’s safety seems largely dependent on their perception of the surrounding locals. When asked about the park’s safety, only Cesar gave credit to the efforts of local law enforcement. For everyone else, their trust in the watchfulness of good neighbors was comfort enough.

Is this implicit trust present in areas outside of the park? Do the people who live on the opposite sides of the houses bordering the park, deeper within the suburbs, feel as confident in the watchfulness of the very same neighbors? I can’t say. Unlike the neighborhoods, where life happens behind closed doors, the parks allow for open interaction with neighbors. It is a community space, open to all, with no opportunities for privacy. To follow the idea further, many aspects of the park oblige neighbor-to-neighbor interactions. Children must share equipment, while watchful parents sit together on benches. The park provides an interaction with the Lafayette/West Lafayette community that the urban environment would fail to produce.

According to Lieutenant Troy Greene of the West Lafayette Police Department, the number or watchfulness of neighbors has no bearing on the amount of crime in the parks (personal communication, November 9, 2016). He cited Happy Hollow and Cumberland Parks, two of the busiest, as having the most criminal activity (mainly car break-ins). Lt. Green believed that it was easier for criminals to get away with crimes; with all the extra people around, “it’s easier to fit in.” Happy Hollow Park was particularly vulnerable; the thick forests prevented clear line-of-sights and separated the parking lot from the park itself. I asked if the presence of parks, filled with distracted families and people milling about, led to more crime. He confidently replied no, not in West Lafayette.

Escape

Under the Purdue Bell Tower, the newly installed fountain filled the air with the sound of bubbling water. Jeffen, a student sitting on a nearby stone bench, was deeply engrossed in a book before I approached. He enjoys the spot because “it feels more isolated than the other spots” (personal communication, October 20, 2016). The area is isolated in a way; although the spot lies adjacent to the busiest sidewalk on campus, a row of foliage separates the sunken space from the pedestrians. The bubbling water drowns out any sound the foliage does not absorb. “You feel like you don’t have to watch your back,” he laughs nervously, noting the absurd quality of the feeling. I agreed and nodded. There are plenty of bustling crowds at Purdue, and this is felt the strongest on the very sidewalk next to the Bell Tower. This three-foot wide sidewalk is a major node between Engineering Mall and Memorial Mall, and it is used by thousands of students commuting between classes. The green space abuts the sidewalk, providing a tempting and accessible escape from the pressing crowds.

In Lafayette’s history, there was a time where escaping to green spaces was a matter of survival, rather than comfort. In the mid-nineteenth century, much of the Midwest was enveloped in the grip of cholera. The disease would appear suddenly, claiming its victims in a matter of hours. Lafayette was hit particularly hard. One man in Lafayette recalled having a conversation with his neighbor about the terrible blight that had come over the city. They soon parted ways for the night. The next morning, the man woke up to see a wagon clattering by his house, bearing the coffin of the very man he had been speaking with the night before (Kriebel, 1999). The source of this disease wouldn’t be discovered for another decade, so until that point, people thought city miasmas spread the disease. The stench of open sewers and coal smoke filled the city air with a thick miasma, which people blamed as the invisible killer. The *Daily Courier* recommended, “Every thing that tends to generate impure air, should at once be removed. . . . In the meantime,” the *Courier* continued, “the city authorities should attend to the cleaning of the public streets and alleys of the filth and rubbish” (“Cholera, Dieting, Cleanliness,” 1851).

OUT OF THE BOX

People fled the miasmas of Lafayette by the hundreds, seeking the clean air of the countryside (“The Lafayette Cholera Epidemic of 1849,” 1891). The refugees overwhelmed many of the farmers along the Wabash River valley. At the peak of the flight, only 3,000 were left in the city, out of an original 6,000. Many people felt that incoming immigrants brought on the miasma: the fact that the first recorded death was an immigrant railroad worker only fueled the connection (Kriebel, 1999). Others believed the plague was a scourge of God, addressing intemperance and wild living in the city. The real culprit was contaminated water; areas with poor water sanitation were hit the hardest, further reifying the connection between the lower classes and the unforgiving plague. As such, cities affected with cholera were seen as poor and immoral; many cities attempted to hide breakouts, including Lafayette (Kriebel, 1999). In the beginning, isolated cases abroad were reported, but as cholera gripped the city, there was less and less coverage. In time, there weren’t enough people left to report anyway.

Around the same time, Fredrick Law Olmstead was developing the idea of the modern park. Unlike the structured, idealized parks of his century, Olmstead believed the park should be an escape from the structure of society:

We want a ground to which people may easily go after their day’s work is done, and where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets, where they shall, in effect, find the city put far from them. We want the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town which will be consistent with convenience and the preservation of good order and neatness. (Benton-Short & Short, 2008, pp. 59–60)

I’m reminded of a conversation with a man named Terry in Happy Hollow Park, who appreciated the park for its natural quality: “It kind of looks like you’re out in the woods, and it’s not very crowded usually” (personal communication, November 2, 2016). The parks in Greater Lafayette, especially the more natural Happy Hollow, are escapes from the structure of urban life. What kind of life is the community escaping from? Lafayette is no longer the miasmatic city of the past, grinding through the industrial revolution. Yet, the parks still play a vital role in the community, and Lafayette is still heavy in industry.

Could the community still be bearing a highly structured, stifling life, to which parks provide a necessary escape?

Absent Green Spaces

As much as modern-day natural spaces reflect aspects of the area’s place-hood, spaces that once existed, but exist no longer, may also reflect these same themes. For example, German National Park exists only in the past, a remnant of a faded community and culture. In the late seventeenth century, Lafayette was home to a large community of German immigrants. Several prestigious members of this community formed a social organization called the Turners (“A Park for German Immigrants,” 1999). Hoping to create a hub for their community, the organization bought several acres of land three miles south of town, along the Wabash. Isolated from the city, German National Park would serve as a retreat for the German community. The park provided opportunities for fishing, hiking, and picnicking for members, as an escape from their daily work. Likewise, the park was fashioned after the gardens of German cities to provide the community a cultural refuge. The Turners planted 200 trees around the park, reminiscent of the folk song “Unter den Linden” (“Under the Linden Trees”; Harlan, n.d.).

A clubhouse in the center of the park acted as a hub of the community, hosting games, meetings, and dances. The park played a vital role in the immigrant community, but it soon began to decline. Members had to pay dues, and the park was difficult to access. Instead, families left the park to visit free parks nearby, such as the quickly developing Columbian Park. The German community began to assimilate into the city, and the desire for the luxury of distinction waned. The final nail in the coffin for German National Park was a fire in the clubhouse in 1908. Its isolation from town proved to be its undoing: too far and secluded for city or rural fire protection, the building burned to the foundation (Kriebel, 1981). The Turners attempted to rebuild and revitalize the park, but there was too little interest or funding. The land was sold nine years later.

The German community still has its place in the local culture, but it has changed dramatically. Every fall, St. Boniface hosts German Fest, a time for locals to drink beer and dance to polka. Whereas the park was far removed from the city, the fest is in

OUT OF THE BOX

the middle of the city. People enjoy the fest immensely, yet it lacks the permanence of the German National Park. The park provided a permanent physical context for German immigrant culture. Like a miniature nation, the park created a space for the unique community to sustain their German culture. The space of the fest is only borrowed, and it's unable to provide a foundation for genuine culture, except that which can be sustained for a few days in drinking and dancing. Likewise, the parks may provide a permanent foundation for local culture, the kind that has no place in the city, but that can be maintained externally by the collected efforts of the community.

Desire

Columbian Park is unique in its origin, as the land was never intended to be a park. In 1875, the city of Lafayette bought a plot of land from Elisha Gunn and his wife and dug a reservoir to meet the water needs of the expanding city ("Out of the Past," 1971). There were no trees or attractions to it, and its function was purely civil. This began to change when the city planted a handful of trees around the reservoir. After that, the locals began to gather there, making an informal park for themselves. The citizens dubbed it "Reservoir Park," and it remained so for nearly two decades (Kriebel, 2005). The city originally resisted the park, discouraging potential visitors by placing "KEEP OFF THE GRASS" signs every couple of spaces. Likewise, they maintained only one small entrance for the locals to use ("Park Beginning a Modest One," 1943). Despite the discouragement, the park became popular. The area was very close to resident neighborhoods, and visitors enjoyed the greenery and water view immensely; the manifested park satisfied the desires of the community.

In time, the city slowly acknowledged the park, removing the KEEP OFF signs in 1891 and allowing visitors to roam freely. The city initiated a three-cent tax toward the park and quickly began to develop it, adding boating elements, the zoo, and a community pool. Soon, the baseball diamond, waterpark, and playgrounds were added. The new variety appealed greatly to the community, and it still does today. Columbian's wide variety also made it a staple of community life. The park hosts innumerable community events and provides dozens of opportunities for entertainment or leisure.

As I've quickly come to understand, parks are a necessity of community, not an aesthetic luxury. Parks provide a context for a community that cannot exist in an urban environment. While privacy is a necessity, Lafayette shows a desire for a public lifestyle as well. The citizens value their community, and they have a desire to interact with it in an appropriate space. Despite obstacles to the park's creation, the community adapted it to their needs, overwhelming obstacles with numbers and decades of persistence.

Memory

For many locals, their memories of green spaces are conspicuous in their memories of life. Natural spaces are distinct places of fun and escape, and these experiences last in the mind. Cesar, now 27, grew up in Lafayette and spent most of his childhood days in Columbian Park. As I spoke with him, he related all the changes in the park over the years: "It's way different!" he declared (personal communication, November 2, 2016). As a kid, he used to visit the monkey exhibit, a concrete island now missing from the lagoon. The playground used to be a pool, where he spent his summers swimming. "It was a nice pool, too," Cesar remarked, reminiscing. "There was even a go-kart track!" Cesar valued the park tremendously, and his memories of childhood are closely tied with Columbian Park. Now Cesar is a father to a two-year-old named Hudson, who is taking up his father's role in the park. "It was nice to play here and see how it's changed since I was a kid, and now he's playing here as a kid, and I'm reliving my experiences playing here as a kid, so it's nice."

Rick and Janet also considered Columbian to be a place of memories (personal communication, November 2, 2016). They spent sixty years in the city and often visited the park as children. Yet, their cherished memories were the times they brought their own children in the past. Janet, when she was a young mother, often brought her children to play in the park and swim in the pool. In time, Rick and Janet brought their grandchildren as well. Although their children have grown and gone, Rick and Janet still enjoy strolling through the park and sitting on the bench swings, watching other children run and play throughout the park. Each hill, stone, and swing in Columbian Park acts as a mental anchor to cherished memories.

OUT OF THE BOX

Grady Clay (1987, p. 85), a celebrated reporter on urban landscape architecture, declared, “memories of childhood are important emotional underpinnings of modern man’s life, and are to be laughed away or disregarded at our peril and great loss.” For the citizens of Lafayette and West Lafayette, the parks are an extension of their childhood. They value them immensely, and they can hardly speak of the parks without mentioning their relation to their youth. The parents I spoke with, including Cesar, the Osbornes, and Dave, enjoyed bringing their children to the parks as it gave them an opportunity to relive their own youth. The adults of the city want to play as much as the children do.

Afterword

To reflect on how this experience has changed my perception of green spaces, and their role in my civic identity, I would need to compare them to my past perceptions. I don’t think I ever truly considered parks beforehand, which would be a perception in itself. Green spaces were simply there, playing roles I didn’t understand or care to comprehend. I felt that green spaces were a luxury mainly valued for their aesthetics. After spending the past few months enveloped in local parks, I’ve developed a better understanding of their role in the Greater Lafayette area. Parks are a space for principles that cannot exist in urban spaces, at least not in the same way. They provide a mental and physical escape from urban structure, an escape that is a real need. The cities have desired these spaces from their earliest histories and have formed them from the nature at hand.

Unstructured space provides opportunity for unstructured culture, both in crime and implicit trust. The park contains enough structure to provide a foundation for the cities’ culture, yet is open and malleable enough to bend to its needs. My

relation to them, my civic identity, is just as malleable. I rarely visited parks before this paper, and I had never visited anything beyond the Wabash. Now, I have had the opportunity to find an easy escape in them. I have experienced their origins and history. Most importantly, I’ve dipped my finger in the community that these spaces host. Like a jeweler turning a faceted gem in the light, these small facets have given me a better understanding of the cities I inhabit.

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