Crisis in the Cities
The recreation era had provided facilities—playgrounds, parkways, stadiums, parking lots, and open beaches—but not space, much less open space. When urban parks began to be characterized as open spaces by municipal systems and federal programs in the mid 1960s, that was strong evidence that a genuine turning point in park history had been reached. A convenient date at which to fix this point is 1965, the year John Lindsay, mayor of New York City, made parks and playgrounds a political issue in his mayoral campaign. The term “open space” had been used in park documents in Chicago as early as 1960, however, and in San Francisco as early as 1962. Lindsay’s campaign received considerable national publicity, and the shift in thinking it represented was nationwide in scope. Thus in the same year the American Institute of Park Executives changed its name to the National Recreation and Park Association to give tangible expression to the new ideal of integrating the physical park and the recreation program. The National Park Service of the Department of Interior declared Central Park and Prospect Park as National Historic Landmarks, making their preservation, as opposed to remodeling, important and possible. The Chicago park commissioners wrote that they considered “1966 the start of an exciting new era in park planning, programming, and development.” As a final note, Henry Hope Reed, an outspoken critic of the new park ideal, designated 1963, when
jazz and rock concerts were introduced in Central Park, as the last tolerable stage of park liberalism. By 1966, he felt, permissiveness reigned and “everything was going on.”

The new departure in park policy was a response to the so-called urban crisis during these years. The key element in the crisis was the wholesale middle-class flight from the inner city, and the basic issue was whether community standards would be maintained in major American cities or the cities abandoned to those who had no means of escaping them.

Because of the crisis the demand for park services used during the recreation era to justify park budgets could no longer be counted on to do so. The middle class was no longer seeking park services; to the contrary, they conspicuously avoided parks, now considered so unsafe that they were part of the urban crisis rather than its cure. To use another phrase typical of the era, park practice wasn’t working. This was because the city needed more from the parks than their customary safety valve function—for these were the years of riots, demonstrations, and “long hot summers.” In this emergency situation for the parks to ameliorate urban conditions—to work at their traditional task—they would need to reassemble all the broken parts of the urban mass peacefully within their boundaries and thus serve as symbols of the cosmopolitan ideal which the street—now unsafe to walk on—no longer embodied. In short, the city needed parks, but it needed them chiefly for imagery and inspiration.

The parks responded to these conditions with talk of self-examination, experiment, and innovation. Behind this talk was a philosophical vacuum: the old models did not apply and the new one, open space, was not much more than a gesture embracing the indefinite future. At its best though, the rhetorical posture could lead to an unprecedented openness to new ideas and possibilities.

If the new park pronouncements were exaggerated this was because park departments were once again openly stimu-
lating demand for services, not just pretending to respond to it, and this stimulation, however hyperbolic, ultimately promoted the endangered cities themselves. Stimulation was the keynote in design of programming as well. The new parks were meant to be as exciting as the pleasure grounds had been programmatically unexciting, and their new image was adventurous, colorful, seductive, chic, hip, hot, and cool. If the pleasure ground had been a pious patriarch, the reform park a social worker, and the recreation facility a waitress or car mechanic, the new park was something of a performance artist.

Anything Goes

The phrase “open space” suggests a number of activities that vision and expediency began to bring into the parks after the mid-1960s. First, open spaces were wide open areas with the connotation that this was where “anything goes,” and where the new permissiveness about the range of possible park activities was appropriate. Second, they were not built up but left open. They were bits and pieces of the city saved from the usual fate of urban land. As such, they were natural sites for preservation and, by extension, for not tampering with people or things at all, which was exemplified by the Be-ins and other attempts of the counterculture to promote experience as such. Third, open spaces were fluid. There was a fluidity at their perimeters, so that park flowed into city and city into park. This went with the characterization of the park as an epitome, or ideal reflection, of the city and with the use of parks for experiences of the pattern and flow of urban life—for the contemplation of the city itself as a work of art.

The “anything goes” attitude has received the most publicity although in terms of the history of park philosophy it is the least innovative aspect of open-space programming since activities “on demand” were already the watchword of the recreation facility era. But the actual situation, by the end of that era, was that the demand for park services was apathetic because parks were viewed as irrelevant. Only their potential for violence attracted the press and television. At the end of the recreation era in Chicago, a landscape architect remarked, “parks tend toward deadness in the crowded city of 1969.” They are deserted and unsafe, littered, with limited programming, old field houses, busy streets, and unwelcoming chain link fences.

Since nothing exciting had been done with parks for so long, they had to be shocked back into life, via newly permissive programming and the publicity to exploit it. For Lindsay’s new Commissioner of Parks, Thomas Hoving, electrified programming was also the only way to attract enough people to the parks to make them safe. To these ends, in New York and elsewhere, administrators brought new activities into the parks, allowed some traditional popular activities for the first time, and wove in elite cultural practices. Anything went: hot mulled wine, rock music, and bluegrass dancing on the snow for a collective New Year’s Eve celebration or Check-A-Child, a low-cost child care program. The Chicago Park District even considered making snowmobiles available in certain parks. Consistent with the concern for safety, dogs were no longer excluded from parks, and though this created a sanitation problem, it was remedied in San Francisco by the first canine comfort stations in the United States.

Certain activities offered during this period, such as Be-ins, Chalk-ins, and Happenings, were new to parks and to the general culture alike. (In New York, these events were dubbed “Hoving’s Happenings.”) Elements of popular culture, some of which had been excluded from parks before, formed the basis of celebrations: games, kite flying, band concerts, beer drinking, feasting. Some activities had been common outside parks but were new in a park context, or freshly conceived. For example, “Open the Ocean Day” in New York gathered park crowds around a sea dyed red, and in Golden Gate Park devotees of Lord Krishna organized a free feast, parade, and fair. Dance and film were packaged

Just as cultural events were updated, so too were athletics: surfing, trampoline, jumping, motocross, and bicycling were introduced, while horseback riding was closed in many systems. Carry-over, or lifetime, sports—badminton, bowling, golf, and tennis—were newly emphasized, giving sports a service orientation. Ghetto kids were taught the traditionally white, middle-class game of tennis. Physical fitness programs put athletics in new packages like "shape-up and fun physical fitness sessions," with instruction in tai chi, slim-and-trim exercises, karate, yoga, and belly dancing.

Elements of elite culture were welcome. New York’s Creative Arts Workshop hired artists to go into the neighborhoods to work with kids. The Philharmonic concert was brought to neighborhood parks, on the assumption that most people did not attend theatre or opera only because they were intimidated by dress codes. The museum without walls concept gained parlance, and wall paintings and murals brought painting to the street. Shakespearean theatre moved to neighborhood parks and playgrounds.

Direct participation was often a central criterion in open-space programming. For example, at a banner bee held in conjunction with the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, those who had made their own banners marched in a parade with them. Because people liked to come together for New Year’s, an alternative to Times Square was offered, with music, puppetry, fireworks, and dancing. The moon launch, broadcast over a giant television screen in Central Park, turned into a collective event. And at the opening of the Olmsted Sesquicentennial a participatory happening centered on a giant food sculpture, a scale model of Central Park devoured by the crowd itself.11

Happenings were participatory—people painting things and themselves, thousands appearing in outlandish costumes

on Halloween to see and be seen. Such participation, moreover, seemed to guarantee experience, the emphasis on which in open-space programming amounted to a moral imperative: “Park and recreation people must begin to take seriously their obligations to provide recreation experiences for people rather than recreation facilities."12

The happening, however, was also something to wonder at and reflect on. More than a simple experience, it was an aesthetic event whose subject, typically, was the urban population which participated in it. An underlying aesthetic assumption connected the happening with other phenomena of the open-space era, including the cultural park. In the late 1970s municipal, regional, and federal agencies cooperated to preserve segments of historic towns and landscapes such as Lowell, Massachusetts. These urban cultural parks, which were intended to preserve an important part of the nation’s industrial and economic history for educational and recreational purposes, were opened on the assumption that all parts of the city—its work spaces, living quarters, and connecting streets—had equal aesthetic and recreational potential, that the city was in fact a work of art worthy of appreciation and objectification.13

This premium on the preservation of valued sites affected the older parks as well. With the designation of Prospect and Central Parks as historic landmarks, for instance, park service had the responsibility of preserving the historic legacy of the parks, not just responding to present demands for their services.14 The federal agency, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, set high priority on reinvestment in existing urban parks through its Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Program. Moreover, ecology—the preservation of the balances of nature—paralleled the preservation of landmarks from the cultural past.

In New York walking and bicycle tours taught ecology along with architecture and overall park design. Although in San Francisco and Chicago horticultural tours and lecture series survived from earlier eras without new ratio-
nales, the National Park Service developed environmental awareness programs that influenced municipal park programming in other cities.¹³

Controversy
When the American Institute of Park Executives changed its name to the National Recreation and Park Association, they pointed out that active recreation had always been part of park programming: "Although it was not recognized as such, recreation was a key part of these early park developments—be it boating, walking, hunting, equestrian trails, skating—recreation was there."¹⁴ But old-fashioned images such as these were a far cry from the realities of the era. The new and vigorous use of the parks, especially during the Vietnam War, was sometimes disruptive, threatening to conventional sensibilities or downright illegal. Park response was predictable.

Demonstrations against the Vietnam War (as during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago) were criticized, both as a strain on plant material and as politically inappropriate; administrators sometimes shunted demonstrators off to less conspicuous and visible parks than Grant Park in Chicago and Central Park in New York by granting them permits elsewhere, grass notwithstanding.¹⁵ Other controversies erupted over provocative performances, such as by the San Francisco Mime Troupe. A popular café at Bethesda Fountain in Central Park became a haunt for marijuana users, and although the police originally thought controlling dealers and smokers would be easy if they were all in one place, the result was considered unsavory, and the café disbanded. Similarly, when folk concert flyers hinted that the concert would turn into a smoke-in, the New York administration revoked the permit.

These rumblings represented a deeper upheaval, indicated by a slogan of the era, Power to the people. Because park officials were committed to a permissive position based on the idea that they were obliged to respond to popular demand, they were frightened, confused, and to some degree compromised. Moreover, for understanding the new situation, they had nothing better than the traditional distinction between active and passive activities, the distinction which underlay the historic conflict between the reform park and pleasure ground and, administratively, between the recreation and park divisions. Whenever there was controversy about the use of parks during the era, the distinction was likely to show up. Thus the activities sponsored by the New York Department of Cultural Affairs were particularly controversial, but the cultural affairs director could argue that people wanted active use even though most park promoters were for passive use. In the same vein Commissioner Hoving justified activity as necessary for "certain economic levels" which "won't buy passive activity" and "have to have a pool because they don't have a racquet and river club." The upshot was that the curator of Central Park was aghast at what he considered excessive use of the park.¹⁶

Activists and passivists alike agreed that active and passive activities could go together, that a balance was necessary, and that both should be offered, but they disagreed sharply about what the proper proportion should be. By the mid-1970s, however, the balance had shifted to the side of those worried about overuse and overdevelopment of parks, and programming reverted to appreciation of park landscape itself.¹⁷ A pragmatic argument against intense usage was that crowds destroyed landscaping. For this reason the Shaefer Music Festival, for example, was discontinued in 1976.

Get It Where You Can
Competition for land, particularly with freeways and housing, was greater than ever before, so open-space ideology rationalized the minipark, the playlot, and the vest-pocket park, small parks that could be tucked into irregular, unusual, inexpensive sites that had been rejected in prior eras. As Mayor Lindsay wrote, "the adventure playground is built upon almost any available site, anywhere in size from

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a quarter-acre to an acre and a half. If the terrain has slope, so much the better. The small size of these parks was both a cause and effect of their proliferation. Ideally, they would be cast in a net over the whole city, both in the inner city and in the expanding suburban fringes, and integrated into an interconnected system of open spaces; park sites, in other words, would extend beyond their literal boundaries into the city as a whole. By contrast, the classic park was inadequate because it did not cohere with the city, residential developments, and schools.

Landscape architects wanted to reveal the potential recreational use of the entire environment. They lamented the counterproductive separation of open-space agencies which overlapped and duplicated functions and competed with one another. Open spaces could include conceptual, temporary, and accidental openings, plazas, pedestrian walks, urban waterfronts, and bicycle paths such as those created in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco which make use of existing roadways.

The street was viewed as the "most exciting space in the city." The new attitude toward streets, sidewalks, backyards, vacant lots, waterfronts, and rooftops involved them in park planning and ideology whether or not they were actually under the administrative control of park departments. Along with this attitude came a new way of looking at the undersides of freeways and bridges, interstices and hidden indoor spaces such as auditoriums and warehouses, commercial areas such as shipping centers, and abandoned industrial plants—all potential sites for the new type of park.

A logical extension of distributing parks everywhere throughout a city was to make them mobile. Through the use of portable equipment, distinctive to this era, transient parks could be established anywhere—streets, empty lots, and rooftops. Some viewed this possibility as a revolutionary virtue: "Future parks will have minimum development. The park of the future will be flexible, beyond any kind of token flexibility now envisioned, convertible to
possibly what are now considered nonpark or even anti-parks uses, and even disposable. In this development both ideal and pragmatic logics were at work; recreational space could be created everywhere without having to spend the money to purchase land and construct permanent buildings.

The Design Revolution
Mayor Lindsay recognized that parks do not need to be conservative, stereotyped, or dull, and asked for an attitude of creativity and experimentation in the design section of New York City's Park Department. The first commissioner of parks under his mayoralty was credited with a design revolution. And up to a point, these claims were in proportion. For example, Lindsay's campaign initiated the first municipal promotion of the European adventure playground idea. The adventure playground was the place where fire, water, and construction materials—lumber, nails, ropes, and bricks—could be used to create and destroy structures over and over again at the discretion of the children.

But municipal parks never accepted the idea that the children themselves should build play equipment; instead, designers transformed the children's home-made, free-form, equipment into new kinds of standardized manufactured items, with stabilized gravel and sand instead of asphalt, recirculating spray pools, vinyl spiderwebs for climbing, and interconnecting equipment. Moreover, popular understanding and use of the new model quickly became conventional. The physical forms of adventure playgrounds became similar, with no unusual requests. Designers reported that most community groups wanted those brand names of free form playstructures known for being hard to vandalize, an area for benches, and a tot lot of sand devoid of equipment so as not to attract teenagers. Despite the exuberance which welcomed this new playground type initially, it was eviscerated in no time.

In general the more revolutionary claims of open-space de-
esign rhetoric—typified by those of Lindsay and his administration—were not realized in actual practice. The more sedate vest-pocket parks, such as Paley Park in New York, have been more successful and probably epitomize American open-space design better than the adventure playground. Paley Park meets researchers' criteria for the design of public yard-type parks: it is sited in the heart of midtown Manhattan, people come there for a variety of reasons, its dramatic center is the sheet of falling water at the end of the lot, it has both sun and shade, and buildings enclose it on three sides. Its seating is designed to provide for different views of the falling water, to accommodate people in different moods and in different social groupings.

The recurrent conflict between active and passive ideals reverberated all the way down to the use of materials and objects. Surfacing is a case in point. The intense use of open spaces required tough surfacing, but the new attitude toward freedom and flexibility required soft and changeable materials. Thus the curator of Central Park convinced the administration to take out asphalt paths. Some people felt that the new materials should be urban in order to suggest continuity with the surrounding nonpark environment, while others felt that they should give "relief from the urban hardness of concrete, steel, and glass!" Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, whose firm has designed several complex fountains in city plazas, favored hard materials intrinsic to the city but arranged to break up the city's rhythms. Landscape designers who worked for a Chicago park district were typically against the use of natural materials because they were "not safe and vandalizable," whereas citizen groups composed of designers and laymen tended to advocate natural materials. Sometimes a backwoods effect was not intentional, but rather the outcome of the use of recycled materials—used bricks, railroad ties, tires, and telephone piles. The vest-pocket parks for adults were used too heavily for grassy lawns so the same sensibilities that favored texture and the feeling of looseness brought cobblestone and herringbone-patterned brick back into the designer's repertoire.
The adventure playground retains little of real world adventure and places a premium on low maintenance, free-form, but standardized, elements. New York City, Department of Parks, Report 1967.
Water was exploited in a more innovative way in this era than in the preceding one. In the recreation era water had been used primarily for swimming, but now in addition to swimming pools came more novel treatments of water. The Paley Park waterfall, used to dampen sound, cool the air, and attract people, exemplified the new approach. Seating was also addressed with new design considerations. To make plazas work as gathering points for a heterogeneous collection of people, researchers recommended that designers arrange vantage points and seating so that people would have choice about whether or not they would sit together or have space to be alone. Something as unparklike as the pedestrian bridge that connects Portsmouth Square with a new high rise in San Francisco was described as having a parklike atmosphere by virtue of its benches and sculpture and broad walkway.

Adventurer playground designers did not even discuss trees and plants, the new urban parks required tree substitutes such as tensile structures, and the national literature explained that landscaping should be confined to low shrubbery to minimize nuisances and vandalism. Urban parks continued to be stripped of vegetation for easier maintenance and police surveillance, but substitutions were met with fervent resistance. Satires on fiberglass flowers, polyurethane turf, plastic grass, recycled water, styrofoam rocks, and asbestos trees and shrubs began to appear, and empirical research was produced that demonstrated the value of trees in heightening user satisfaction and increasing property values.

Fencing was disappearing along with vegetation. The ever-higher chain link fences around parks of the recreation era went out of fashion in the open-space era. Open-space advocates tore them down or replaced them with more picturesque rustic fencing. Antibilboard sentiment emerged again. Buildings were out of fashion, so no new building type emerged in the era. The general mood against much building construction was for both ideological and economic reasons. Campaigns were mounted to keep

Modern architecture finally surfaced in parks of the open-space era, even though dominant interest lay in restoration. Each function within the building created its own shape on the exterior, vernacular sheds, clerestories, and plain stucco surfaces completed the symbolism of modernism. Brooklyn, New York City, Department of Parks, Report 1967.
school buildings out of parks, reversing the previous era's idea of school-park integration, but the extensions of the Metropolitan Museum in Central Park and Chicago's Conference Center on the lakefront were unsuccessfully opposed. Underground garages, once thought unobtrusive, became objectionable because of their big exhaust vents. Even park stables for horses were controversial in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. Not surprisingly, then, interest in architectural style focused on the renovation of landmark buildings. In San Francisco the renovation of the romanesque Sharon Building at the children's playground, the restoration of the windmills, and the reuse of the Palace of Fine Arts as a Museum of Perception, Science, and Technology paralleled activities in New York. There a copy of a ladies pavilion was made after the original was allowed to decay, a conservatory was restored, and the old fire department building was offered to the park system for a museum.

Finally, during this period some city observers reevaluated the significance of monuments and statues. As one opinion put it, they "celebrate a city's heroes and recapitulate its past..." But critics from every quarter attacked monumentality. The monument—whether a statue or a grandiose structure—was shunned in an era that favored keeping in touch with the human scale of things. Accordingly, the characteristic sculpture of the era was play equipment, and the sculpture actually commissioned was playful in its appreciation of movement, irregular form, and irreverent attitude. It was criticized for all these reasons. The Vallinacourts Fountain at the Embarcadero in San Francisco was called a scrap heap by a city supervisor, and adventure playgrounds and play sculpture were described as a Walt Disney-ish pastiche. Yellow-painted steel panels hanging on trees in Central Park were viewed as "a desecration of our trees—like hanging a rock around a man's neck"—ignominious because their artificiality was incongruous with nature.