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The Histories of New York City's Parks

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Special Issue: The Histories of New York City's Parks

Devanney Triangle is a tiny sliver of a park, nestled among buzzing thoroughfares in the Bronx. Few besides local residents in the Tremont neighborhood have likely heard of the park or could pinpoint it on a map. And yet, small and unknown as it may be, Devanney Triangle can tell many stories about debates over city parks in New York and elsewhere.

In 1968, when Devanney Square (as it was then known) was just shy of 30 years old, neighbors had grown concerned about the park's safety. The neighborhood suffered from rising poverty rates, and the park served as a barometer for the social issues afflicting the community. Local residents rallied together and landscaped the park on their own dime, with the faith that "beauty is its own defense." Their hope was that "undesirables would avoid an area that, by its neatness, showed that authority existed in the community." As the garden bloomed, the community group received funding from Operation Better Block, a neighborhood improvement program sponsored by the city and the Bristol-Myers Company. The *New York Times* celebrated as this "racially mixed neighborhood" rallied against rampant muggings through grassroots park beautification.ⁱ

Nearly 50 years later, however, the park continues to be a contested space. In 2014, as Devanney Triangle became home to increasing numbers of homeless New Yorkers, the local Community Board and Parks Department discussed removing the park's benches to make it uninhabitable. Though they admitted that it was a last

resort, the Community Board members were clearly desperate to take control of one of the few green spaces in the neighborhood. While the community's strategies have changed from the 1960s, access to and the condition of the park has clearly been a longstanding issue for residents, whether they sleep in beds or on benches.ⁱⁱ

A park like Devanney Triangle does not have a private conservancy like Central Park, Battery Park, or Prospect Park, helping to fund its maintenance when city budgets fail to meet its needs. Mayor Bill de Blasio and Parks Commissioner Mitchell J. Silver launched the Community Parks Initiative in 2014, taking important steps to fund capital improvements for parks in low-income neighborhoods, thereby filling in when private funding is unavailable. Devanney Triangle, however, is not on the list.

As you will see in this special issue, debates over access to parks, who belongs in a park, how they should be used, how they should be funded, and who should manage them, have a long history. The scholarship in this issue integrates social, urban, policy, and environmental history, bringing out the meaning and role that open spaces and leisure have played in the lives of all city residents. In the first article, **“Parks, People, and Property Values: The Changing Role of Green Spaces in Antebellum Manhattan,”** I look at the funding structure and philosophy behind parks designed in the 1830s compared to more well-known Central Park. The history of the early parks such as Union Square and Gramercy Park shed light on how a tax structure silently enabled environmental injustices. However, just a few

decades later when politicians, journalists, and park advocates began discussing Central Park, the city's increasingly visible poverty and social unrest inspired new ways of thinking about the role a park might play in a troubled city.

In **“Rethinking the Bronx’s ‘Soundview Slums’: The Intersecting Histories of Large-Scale Waterfront Redevelopment and Community-Scaled Planning in an Era of Urban Renewal,”** Kara Schlichting traces the trajectory of a blue-collar community and its neighboring park on the rocky beaches and reedy inlets of Clason Point in the Bronx. In the first half of the twentieth century, working-class New Yorkers built a vibrant summer colony on the waterfront and enjoyed its amusement district. The rise and fall of postwar urban renewal plans in the region, coupled with the community’s unique response, however, took the waterfront park and the residential neighborhood on divergent paths. Schlichting’s careful study shows both the benefits and pitfalls of large-scale master plans.

The complex legacy of an anti-freeway victory is at the foundation of Patrick Nugent’s article, **“From the Richmond Parkway to the Staten Island Greenbelt: The Rise of Ecological Zoning in New York City.”** Nugent shows how the Staten Island Citizens Planning Committee was unique among other anti-freeway groups in that they called for high-density, socially accessible, as well as environmentally attractive developments. However, when met with the realities of the economic crisis of the 1970s, the Parks Department and City Planning Commission’s decision

to adopt private strategies for environmental management led to far different results than the group initially envisioned.

Finally, Suleiman Osman's article **"We're Doing it Ourselves': The Unexpected Origins of New York City's Public-Private Parks during the 1970s Fiscal Crisis,"** challenges our traditional understanding of the privatization of parks to show that it came from multiple sources, not just a conservative faith in free market management. Instead, Osman shows that as communities responded to the city's financial crisis in the 1970s with a "do-it-yourself" urbanism that included the creation of adventure playgrounds, community gardens, and volunteer patrols, some of the seeds of privatization were planted. In other words, the history of the privatization of parks is far more complex than we typically realize.

Parks are fertile grounds for understanding how cities plan, conceive, maintain, and manage space. They show the complexity of public versus private control, as well as grassroots versus top-down planning. Parks can be agents of gentrification, whether intentionally or unintentionally. They can also be places where people of all backgrounds meet and interact. As was true with Devanney Triangle, they can also serve as a symbol of society's troubles whether that means homelessness, budget failures, environmental damage, or the like. They can involve displacement and loss. But they can also be beacons of light when it comes to recreation, rejuvenation, public health, and environmental justice. Parks, whether in New York or elsewhere, can say a lot about how we conceive of and plan for our society.

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ⁱ Nan Ickeringill, "A Rundown Park gets a Face-Lifting," *New York Times*, 2 October 1969, p50.

ⁱⁱ Lisa Foderaro, "Tensions Over Park Behavior as Homelessness Rises in New York City," *New York Times*, 14 November 2014, pA17.