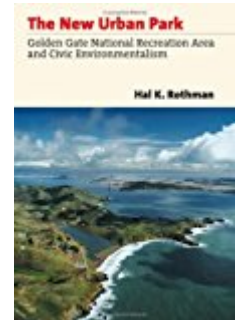


**Hal K. Rothman.** *The New Urban Park: Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Civic Environmentalism.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. vii + 258 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1286-4.



**Terence Young.** *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. xi + 280 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-7432-1.



**Reviewed by** Colin Fisher

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Historians of American urban parks have generally focused on cities east of the Mississippi. By my estimation, New York's Central Park has received more scholarly attention than all Far Western urban parks combined. It is good, then, to see two new books that tell the story of park development in San Francisco. In *Building San Francisco's Park's*, geographer Terence Young chronicles San Francisco's park movement during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In *The New Urban Park*, historian Hal Rothman documents the late-twentieth-century development of Golden Gate National Recreation Area. While Young explores how nineteenth-century San Franciscans emulated eastern parks, Rothman argues that in the twenty-first century, the rest of the nation will

look upon the Bay Area's Golden Gate National Recreation Area as a model of urban park development.

Young is interested in elite park advocates and how they used parks to further social change. He argues in this well-researched and richly illustrated book that park designers and boosters believed that parks would contribute to four virtues: health, wealth, republican democracy, and social order. But while these four virtues remained relatively static during the period under study (1850-1930), parks themselves changed dramatically.

In the earlier "romantic" period, nineteenth-century San Franciscans believed that large, undifferentiated scenic parks, such as those common

back east, would best produce the four virtues. Frederick Law Olmsted, who managed a California gold mine during the 1860s, urged Californians to look back to the Mediterranean and the Near East for inspiration when designing their landscapes. Most San Franciscans, though, wanted English park landscapes, similar, ironically, to Olmsted's own Central Park in New York. Through extensive trial and error, large amounts of water, and the use of native and especially non-native plants, civil engineer William Hammond Hall ultimately transformed the rolling sand dunes and coastal scrub of western San Francisco into the green lawns and beautiful groves of Golden Gate Park.

Later, in the very late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, elites in San Francisco believed that they could best effect the four virtues by building what Young calls "rationalistic" parks. Mirroring growing specialization in the larger society, San Francisco parks, including Golden Gate Park, grew more segmented with areas marked off for particular uses. At the same time, the city built a number of small neighborhood parks for the pursuit of organized leisure.

Young is quite right that park builders believed that their landscapes would result in health, wealth, republican democracy, and social order, but I am unconvinced by his argument that a romantic park ideal lapsed into a "rationalistic" drive for specialization. As some historians of parks have noted, builders of Progressive-Era athletic parks were ambivalent about rationalization and the gospel of efficiency. Certainly athletic park advocates ran tight exercise drills and built rigidly structured spaces for sports, but such spaces were intended to restore the natural body after a day of regimented work or school. In short, behind even the most controlled athletic park was a strong romantic, even antimodern impulse.[1] At the same time, it is important to remember that Frederick Law Olmsted, the romantic, knew

something about efficiency and the specialization of labor.[2]

Although Young focuses on elites, at times, other actors briefly enter the story. For instance, we learn that one of the first private parks in San Francisco was a German beer garden and that ethnic communities lobbied for parks. These brief glimpses made me wish that Young had expanded his scope and incorporated more of San Francisco's vibrant social history into his narrative. Historians Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rozensweig convincingly show that in New York rank-and-file people contributed to the final outcome of Central Park, not only by working as laborers in the park, but by challenging park rules, investing the landscape with meaning, and sometimes making successful demands on park managers and advocates.[3] In their contributions and in their resistance, average people shaped the park movement of New York City. No doubt the same thing happened in San Francisco. What did Irish, Italian, or Chinese immigrants think of their new public parks? What social virtues did these groups give to nature and to what ends did they put park landscapes? What influence did these people have on the intellectual culture and landscape projects of Young's privileged subjects?

Certainly, average San Franciscans were not quiet during and after the creation of Golden Gate National Recreation Area. As Hal Rothman shows, citizens at the grass roots played a large role in shaping what has become one of the world's largest urban parks.

Intent on quelling social disturbance, the Nixon Administration urged the National Park Service to create "parks for the people, where the people are." At the same time, San Francisco activists hoped to transform decommissioned federal properties--Fort Baker, Fort Mason, Alcatraz, and ultimately the Presidio--into new parks for their city. The final result of these dual initiatives was the creation of Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) in 1972.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Park Service, nature organizations, local activists, and Congressional Representative Phil Burton worked to incorporate thousands of acres of federal, state, city, and private land into the new park. By the 1990s, the park included a former prison, a decommissioned Nike missile base, hundreds of National Register structures from a variety of periods, a fleet of decaying historic ships, large swaths of rural Marin County, above ground and underwater archaeological sites, coastal fortifications, the Presidio (one of the most coveted pieces of real estate in the Bay Area, albeit a site contaminated by abandoned military waste), and much more.

At GGNRA, the Park Service faced Herculean tasks. Unlike San Francisco's nineteenth-century park builders, the Park Service sought to protect the Bay Area's native environment (of all national parks, GGNRA contains the fourth largest number of federally protected species). Park managers also had to care for a very large number of structures and cultural landscapes, and interpret complicated regional, urban, military, and ethnic histories to the public. On top of all this, San Francisco hikers, dog walkers, birders, mountain bikers, hang gliders, and others had made previous claims to lands suddenly run by the Park Service, and these users frequently chaffed at new rules. GGNRA posed an enormous and unprecedented challenge for park administrators. And they faced much of this challenge during the 1980s and 1990s, a period during which Republican critics of the Park Service grew more vocal and powerful.

Especially for a large bureaucracy, the Park Service adapted quickly. The challenges of running a large urban park forced the Park Service to adopt a far more inclusive and responsive approach that brought many vocal and often-conflicting Bay Area constituencies to the table. Rothman argues that unlike in the past, national park management solutions emerged out of dialogue rather than from decree.

At the same time, the sheer cost of managing the Presidio and its structures prompted the Park Service to create an unprecedented partnership with the congressionally chartered Presidio Trust. After 1996, management of the Presidio was not only in the hands of the Park Service, but a trust steered by some very wealthy and powerful individuals, a trust that some complained had little public accountability and seemed overly cozy with large corporate players. Rothman rightly notes that the Presidio's "complicated status stood astride the blurring line between public and private in the United States" (p. 198).

Rothman is quite right that GGNRA is a hint of what is to come, and park managers would do well to closely examine this valuable, detailed book. But I fear that the new century will not bring more large-scale national parks running through and along our large metropolitan areas. Nor will the Park Service necessarily grow more responsive to the needs of average American citizens. Sadly, GGNRA may very well prove to be a harbinger of further privatization of local, state, and national parks by corporate interests. Since Rothman's book went to press, the drive for privatization at GGNRA and throughout the National Park Service has only accelerated. In 2003, the Bush Administration asked the Park Service to dip into its own budget to explore outsourcing. GGNRA was scheduled as the subject of one of the first privatization studies.[4]

These two fine books contribute to our understanding of San Francisco's past and the history of urbanization in the Far West. Even more, they illuminate the place of nature in urban life while simultaneously offering us an intriguing window on the history of the American public sphere.

#### Notes

[1]. See for instance, Donald Mrozek, "The Natural Limits of Unstructured Play, 1880-1914," in *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 210-226.

[2]. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), pp. 150-179.

[3]. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*.

[4]. "Interior Appropriations Bill: Final Spending Shortchanges Parks," *National Parks Magazine* (Winter 2004) <http://www.npca.org/magazine/2004/januaryfebruary/news6.asp>; also see, Kerry Tremain, "Pink Slips in the Parks," *Sierra Magazine* (September/October 2003) <http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/200309/parks.asp>.

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