

Heath Massey Schenker. *Melodramatic Landscapes: Urban Parks in the Nineteenth Century*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. Illustrations. 232 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2842-5.



Reviewed by Katy Layton-Jones

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Commissioned by Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

At the end of a decade during which urban green space ascended the hierarchy of public and political priorities, it is worth noting how few scholarly works have emerged on this subject. Historians and landscape professionals seeking grounding in the history of park development continue to resort to Hazel Conway's chronological account, *People's Parks: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (1991). Although other authors have elaborated on Conway's narrative, contributing to our understanding of park design, use, and management, such works tend to fall into two main categories: those that we might deem "popular" histories, including Sara Cedar Miller's *Central Park, An American Masterpiece* (2003); and those that locate themselves intellectually within the burgeoning literature on the eighteenth-century British town. This latter category is home to a growing number of works on the phenomenon of the pleasure garden, the most recent of which is David E. Coke and Alan Borg's *Vauxhall Gardens: A History* (2011).

Throughout the nineteenth century, public green space reshaped and redefined the urban landscape. Far from being interruptions to urbanization, botanic gardens, parks, public squares, and walks were an intrinsic component of urban expansion and particularly suburban sprawl. Their creation was seen not merely as an antidote to pollution and disease, but also as evidence of the cultural and civic values cultivated by newly empowered urban societies. Indeed, the aspiration to create, or more accurately protect, urban green spaces was expressed in urban communities long before the means became available to realize them. In Britain, after a few early examples in the 1840s, the greatest proportion of substantial public parks was created between 1865 and 1900, in the wake of economically damaging cholera epidemics. After the success of Central Park, opened in 1857, America followed suit. Advocates of the parks movement testified to their transformative impact on public health and moral behavior, particularly among the lower classes. Lakes, rock formations, "rotten rows," flower

beds, and wooded groves certainly introduced topographical diversity into many cities. Yet, notwithstanding the investment of time, money, and imagination in these sites, historians remain divided on the impact of parks on the daily experience of nineteenth-century residents. As Heath Massey Schenker highlights, despite ambitions to create parks of equal quality across cities, the greatest proportion of funds tended to be allocated to flagship projects in wealthy, bourgeois neighborhoods. As a focus of historical enquiry, these widely celebrated landscapes contain the potential for truly exciting and influential work. Even so, among historians there remains a resistance to engaging with a subject that has, in the past, suffered from the label of “local history.” Consequently, few have subjected the nineteenth-century public park to scholarly scrutiny. Schenker’s work is a rare exception.

Taking three geographically disparate and politically dissimilar locations, Schenker attempts, and largely succeeds, in identifying the common ideological, aesthetic, social, and political values that underpinned their establishment, design, and use. Employing a wide range of illustrations and maps, and leading readers from Haussmann’s Paris to Mexico City and on to New York City, Schenker blends visual, cultural, and political analysis to produce a convincing new perspective on urban green space. The central theme of Schenker’s thesis is the analogy he identifies between the emotive, sensational, and sentimental qualities of nineteenth-century melodrama and the similarly affecting visions and arrangements created in public parks. Some of the concepts presented are not new, such as the notion of public parks as a tool for social control or as a stimulus for real-estate investment. Schenker interprets such efforts as conscious attempts to socially “balance” cities like Paris by placating the poor and rewarding the nouveau riche. Yet, if such observations are not wholly new, they are certainly welcome, as they make plain the mercenary motivations that have frequently underpinned the provi-

sion of public green space. New initiates to the subject will find the introduction especially useful as the origins of park design in country estates and the picturesque are outlined clearly and concisely.

Schenker does not limit his account to well-rehearsed narratives; but rather, he uses them as a route to a reconceptualization of ideologically charged spaces. In the author’s own words, this book “conceptualizes the urban park as a public stage on which complex processes of social differentiation played out in the nineteenth century, both figuratively and literally” (p. 18). This concept of the park as a theater is explored from a number of perspectives across all three main case studies: Parisian parks, Chapultepec Park, and Central Park. Some of these perspectives are perhaps predictable, although no less fascinating and persuasive for being so. For example, authors from Conway to John Dixon Hunt have observed the manner in which a sequence of distinct landscapes within a park created the illusion of a larger site. Schenker’s theory of melodrama takes this observation to a new level by exploring the similarities between these topographical “moments” and the sentimental or sensational moments used to great effect in such plays as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Describing a landscape, such as Central Park, as “a spectacle of the melodramatic imagination,” Schenker moves the historical debate forward beyond the confines of conventional landscape history (p. 184). Although simulated rock arrangements, waterfalls, and lakes are obviously analogous to stage sets, the notion that these features created a kind of topographical parallel to dramatic action is both perceptive and new.

Of the three case studies, the analysis of Chapultepec Park is likely to contribute the most to our understanding of urban public green space. As a site of real drama, in the form of human sacrifice, war, and political wrangling, the Mexican park provides a unique opportunity to test the book’s central premise. Chapultepec exemplifies

the nature of public park development and the changing values that have underpinned their evolution. Originally virgin territory celebrated for its natural springs, this site went on to house a temple, a palace, and a war memorial; it became synonymous with Mexican nationalism and yet was subsequently subjected to “improvements” in line with European principles of garden design. It is, as all public parks are, a product of changing ideologies, tastes, and fortunes, and Schenker demonstrates its international relevance with conviction. The reader is implicitly invited to consider comparisons with other sites not attended to here, such as Birkenhead Park in Britain and The Promenade, Santiago, Chile. This wider contextualization takes place both within the main text and in a series of “sidebars” containing extracts from primary source material pertaining to parks across the world. Although sometimes distracting, they are often humorous, and they serve to provide a broader grounding in the subject than could be gleaned from three case studies.

In undertaking such a novel approach to public parks, the author has embraced a significant challenge. By engaging with a subject that historians have traditionally neglected, Schenker has made an important contribution to the interpretation of sites that many admire but few understand. The case studies are fascinating and well selected and his thesis is clearly and convincingly expressed. Although *Melodramatic Landscapes* makes only small inroads into the vast body of work yet to be done, it demonstrates successfully the richness of the subject matter and the potential for truly groundbreaking work in a neglected field of study.

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