Segregating the Parks

The recreation expert, wrote Hartford Parks Superintendent George A. Parker around 1911, performs an essential public service in easing the troubles of every city dweller. The expert “takes in hand the most wretched and forsaken child in our midst and leads it to the playground and its activities, and with the other hand points the overburdened banker and business man to the restfulness of the rural park.” Guided by human sympathy and scientific method, the expert would work to meet the special needs of everyone. But as Parker described it, the only link between different groups of people at leisure was that they would all be served by the same public recreational system. The urchin and the banker were to be equal—but separate.

From the 1890s through the 1920s, Hartford’s park officials worked to build a parks and recreation system based increasingly on segregation of space. In 1890 Hartford had only one major park, whose uses were more narrowly restricted than Horace Bushnell had intended. The park officials and landscape designers who created a vastly expanded park system in the 1890s initially expected the new parks to serve the same function they attributed to Bushnell Park: providing a naturalistic retreat for the aesthetic enjoyment and psychic renewal of city dwellers. Unlike Horace Bushnell, they and the elite Municipal Art Society attempted to make the parks a completely separate world from that of the streets—protected pockets of nature and gentility in a hostile urban environment. Troubled by the failure of this effort and torn by competing demands from different social groups, Parker turned to segregating space within the park system.

He greatly expanded the athletic facilities, drawing noisy crowds into certain sections of the parks, while trying to preserve diminished sections of naturalized landscape. Under his leadership, different parks took on special characteristics to conform to the perceived needs of the local inhabitants, and individual parks were carved up into a patchwork of different uses. By the 1910s, Parker was explicitly calling for greater segregation of park visitors on the basis of age, gender, and socioeconomic status. He discarded much of Bushnell’s conservative vision of the park as a unifying institution, believing that the clashing interests of different groups made unity impossible—and that unity was in any case less important than the fulfillment of individual needs.

Less and Less a Mere Common

Bushnell had seen no need either for separate spaces within his new park or for special restrictions on its use. His comments suggested that the main purpose of the park was to allow people to stroll about, appreciating natural beauty and feeling a sense of harmony with their neighbors. But it also expected that the park would provide room for pleasure drives, parades, holiday celebrations, invalid’s rest, and children’s play. Only the drives themselves involved any special facilities, and Bushnell said nothing to suggest that they should be separated from the rest of the park. His desire for unstructured inclusivity was shared by Mayor Henry C. Deming, who said in an 1860 address to the Common Council that the park should be “a pleasant promenade, parade, and playground. Nothing in my judgment should be done in the way of decoration to abridge the freedom of its use, nor the equality of its enjoyment by the refined and the unrefined, the washed and unwashed. It should not be converted into
prim parterres, forbidding familiarity, sensitive at the approach of rude boys and unpolished brogans... nor too much space surrendered to drives—but it should remain an open, free, unprivileged Common for the people.”

Some of the park commissioners saw no need to keep customary street activities out of Bushnell Park. The western section, the commission reported in 1864, would be ideal for “the general Parade Ground, for the accommodation of the Military, Firemen, and other gatherings of the public, which have of late years so overcrowded Main street.” Through the early 1860s, public meetings were held in the park, and ball games were played. But the opinion of city officials was divided. On the one hand, they did not want to seal the park off from its surroundings, but on the other, they did not want it to be overwhelmed by inappropriate activities. Like Bushnell, they wanted the park to be both inclusive and uplifting, both open to the street and clearly distinguished from it. Not everyone could agree what to do if these goals came into conflict. In an 1861 report, the park commissioners expressed concern about the proper use of the park:

Having expended so much for this object, it was not to be neglected or abused—it was not to be treated as a common pasture or open field, but in a manner consistent with the wealth and dignity of the City and the true benefits to be derived therefrom... We desire an open breathing place, for amusement and recreation, where the old and young of both sexes, can enjoy themselves rationally and safely, where the great requisites shall be green grass, dry and pleasant walks and enough of trees for shade and ornament.

The commissioners who wrote the report wanted to include a wide range of people but sought to limit their activities to strolling, driving, and contemplating nature. Such restrictions had classist overtones. Driving was obviously limited to those who could afford carriages. The other activities were open to everyone but were based on elite and middle-class ideas of decorum and self-improvement that many working-class people did not share. Working people were welcome in the park as long as they were willing to behave by the standards of their betters.

By the late 1860s the park commission had firmly decided on this as its policy. A subtle tilt had begun as early as 1861, when the commission, on the recommendation of Frederick Law Olmsted, hired the landscape architect Jacob Weidenmann to redesign the park. Like the initial, amateurish design by the city surveyor, Weidenmann’s plan accurately reflected Bushnell’s concept of a space partially open to the surrounding streets, yet it placed more emphasis on the picturesque qualities of the park’s interior. The pathways, instead of merely running through a central intersection on their way across the park, now curved past clumps of greenery and converged obliquely on a pond with a fountain. The new design suggested that the park visitor was expected to linger and enjoy the appearance of the surroundings. The spaces off the paths were not just ambiguous voids that could be used for anything, but were part of an artistic composition. Such a composition had to be protected from the damage done by “ignorant and malicious individuals,” Mayor Charles R. Chapman noted in 1866, in a call for more diligent police patrols. The park’s ornamental appearance was heightened by the introduction of a statue in 1869, recalled Sherman W. Adams, a later park commission president. “It may be truly said that a change in the treatment and uses of the park was begun, which has more and more developed. It thereafter took on more of the character of a public garden, and became less and less a mere common and stamping-ground.”

In 1884 Acting Mayor Frank Kellogg refused to allow the Amalgamated Trades Union to hold a mass meeting in the park, explaining that “so beautiful and attractive a Park” had to be preserved from damage. The park commissioners rejected a similar request by a man who wanted to make weekly public addresses from the park terrace, on the grounds that such speeches would annoy people who wanted to admire beautiful landscapes in peace. “Many acts which might be tolerated upon a public highway, or a common, would be out of place here.” Politics was apparently as out of place in the park as it would be in the parlor. The rough-and-tumble play of the working classes was also inappropriate. The park, reported the commissioners in 1889, was too widely known as a place of beauty and repose, to be subjected to the harsh usage and disturbing element of boisterous frolics, games, plays or scuffles. The lawns have been kept fairly free from the wear
and tear of boot heels of intruders, who care for the Park only for the chance it affords for a scrimmage with sticks, or shillelals and stones; the outgrowth of the craze for so-called "polo." A large element of those who visit the Park for any kind of sport, is pure hoodlum; that is, it cares nothing for the Park, as a Park, at all.⁹

Actually, the working-class residents of Hartford did want a park, but a park of their own. Residents of the Irish working-class area around Avon Street, northeast of the central city, petitioned the city in 1873 to create a park at a site near their homes. But when they learned that the city planned to finance the project by levying assessments on property owners in the neighborhood, they divided. One faction still wanted the park, but another group declared that they did not want it if they had to pay for it. This latter group complained that the entire city had been taxed to pay for Bushnell Park and for improvements to the South Green, while the hardworking people of their neighborhood had been left with the "discomforts of poor streets, poor lights, poor drainage, and no breathing places." If the more "aristocratic" people had been given a park at city expense, the workingmen should not have to pay for theirs. Hartford voters finally approved spending city money in 1875 to build a park between Avon, North Front, and Windsor streets, but city officials refused to undertake the project on the grounds that the ongoing economic depression made it too burdensome on taxpayers. Supporters of the park now claimed that it would benefit the entire city by improving sanitary conditions in that neighborhood and preventing the start of epidemics. "An improvement to that part is a benefit to the whole town, the same as an improvement to any part of a house is a benefit to the whole house," they argued, but to no avail.¹⁰ Unlike Bushnell Park, the proposed North Front Street Park was too small and too isolated in an outlying slum to be plausibly described as an amenity for the entire city. The use of taxpayers' money for such a project could be successfully defended only if Hartford residents were willing to redefine the public interest to embrace a system of public services, in which the city as a whole would pay equitably for the special needs of each neighborhood. When public funds were tight, as they were in the 1870s, it was easier for public officials to stick to the older belief that neighborhood improvements should be funded by the neighborhood.¹¹

The Rain of Parks

Not until the 1890s did Hartford create a park system to provide recreational spaces for every section of town. By that time, trolley service and population growth were spurring a geographic expansion of the city and creating neighborhoods as far as two miles from Bushnell Park. In this sprawling new city, it became considerably less convenient for many people to visit the park. Geographical expansion interfered with what Horace Bushnell had hoped would be the natural flow of every citizen toward a single outdoor parlor, diminishing whatever value the park might have had as a means of unifying the people.¹²

Instead, the Rev. Francis Goodwin and other members of the park commission worked to acquire land that would allow the creation of a citywide park system. Their efforts produced what later park officials and local historians have called the "Rain of Parks," in which five major parks were either given to the city or purchased during 1894 and 1895. The donations were what became Elizabeth Park on the Hartford–West Hartford border, Pope Park, donated by the industrialist Albert Pope and located conveniently close to his Capitol Avenue bicycle factory; and Keney Park, which stretched through the North End and across the city line into Windsor. The city's purchases were Riverside Park, on the Connecticut River northeast of downtown, and Goodwin Park, on the Wethersfield town line. A sixth major addition to the park system was the former estate of the arms manufacturer Samuel Colt, which his widow left to the city in 1905. A broken ring of parks totaling nearly twelve hundred acres now encircled the city—thirty times the acreage of Bushnell Park. The designs for most of the new parks were done by the firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot, later renamed "Olmsted Brothers," which was led at this time by John C. Olmsted.¹³

Frederick Law Olmsted, John Olmsted's stepfather, had pioneered the idea of a park system in his plans for the Buffalo parks in 1868, and he had assisted in the planning of the more elaborate "Emerald Necklace" around Boston from the 1870s to the 1890s. These new park systems featured scattered parks linked by greenbelts and parkways. Frederick Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux, viewed the Buffalo system as a "comprehensive arrangement for securing refreshment, recreation and health to the people." Multiple parks were needed in scattered locations
to ensure that everyone in the growing metropolis had access to parkland. Both in Buffalo and in Boston, Olmsted included some provisions for active recreation, which he carefully separated from the more traditional naturalistic landscapes. To him active recreation was less important than the contemplation of beauty.16

John Olmsted designed the Hartford system along similar lines. In a 1901 speech he explained that the newly created parks were “properly called a system of parks because they have been located with due regard to equitable geographical distribution and to take advantage of, and as far as possible to include, specimens of the several types of natural scenery available in the vicinity.” Riverside Park was distinguished by its riverfront meadows, Keney Park by its woods, Elizabeth Park by its resemblance to a “gentleman’s suburban residence grounds,” Bushnell Park by its urban surroundings, Pope Park by its remarkably varied views, and Goodwin Park by its oak-dotted fields. Unlike later designers, John Olmsted said little about how the parks would be used and nothing to suggest that different groups of people would use different parks. He compared the park system instead to the school system, which included scattered facilities but was held together by a “unity of purpose and methods.”19

Most of the new park designs treated active recreation as secondary. The Olmsted brothers’ 1898 design for Pope Park, in the factory district, showed a fanciful romantic landscape with scenic lawns named Hollowmead and Hithermead, as well as wooded areas named Eastbourne Grove, Bankside Grove, and Hillside Ramble. “Winding picturesquely along its northwestern boundary is the Park River [formerly the Little River], its banks adorned with verdant lawns and groves,” read a 1900 description of the nearly completed park. “Indeed, the chief charm of Pope Park lies in its abundance of trees and water. Two groves of unusual beauty grace the Park . . . With their rustic seats and bridges, and welcome shade, they are favorite resorts for picnic parties, and for all seekers after rest and quiet.” Nevertheless, the Olmsteds and the park commissioners made some provision for active recreation even within this naturalistic pleasure ground. The Olmsted’s plan for Pope Park expanded on the example of segregated land use set by the modified Bushnell Park, which by that time included a children’s play space and areas “set apart as common” where people were allowed to walk on the grass. The Pope Park plan included a “Little Folks Lawn” and two isolated meadows to be used for baseball. The baseball fields, labeled Nethermead and Thithermead, were separated from the main part of the park by a steep hill and the river, respectively. Park designers and officials had now begun in earnest to divide parkland into contrasting uses.16

The park commissioners saw the development of the sixty-three-acre Riverside Park as a chance to create something new and different—a park designed mainly for the active recreation needs of the poor. In his 1894 report, the park commission president, Sherman Adams, had acknowledged, “There are different ideas prevailing as to the use and treatment of the park grounds. Some think of them only as places of recreation, or sport.” Rather than trying to suppress active recreation, which would mean fighting a never-ending battle to protect Bushnell Park from disruption and damage, the commission should provide separate parkland for that purpose. Though John Olmsted would not admit it in his 1901 speech, Riverside Park was designed primarily for the inhabitants of the East Side tenement district nearby. Some East Siders were already using the riverfront meadows for sports and other recreation, but the area had an unsavory—even dangerous—reputation. Part of it was occupied by a hobo encampment. Charles E. Gross, the park commission president, wrote in 1897 that Riverside “will never become a show ground—in the sense that Bushnell Park is such—not call for elaborate treatment. It will be subject to rougher use than parks in general. Indeed, it is already, in part, so used; and is quite satisfactory as a ball-ground.” In addition to baseball fields, the new park offered a “Little Folks Lawn” (like Pope Park) and a wading pool, which immediately drew crowds of children. Most of the park, in fact, was taken up with spaces for active recreation. As parts of the park began opening in 1898, it proved to be a huge success. “Riverside Park . . . has given more satisfaction towards the proper fulfillment of its purpose, and has benefited and is appreciated by more people in need and want of such grounds of rest and recreation than any other in the park system,” reported Parks Superintendent Theodore Wirth in 1900.17

In the early twentieth century, the city built on the examples set by these two projects, creating more and more divisions within parkland like those in the Olmsted’s plan for Pope Park, and making parks assume specialized functions like those of Riverside Park.
Escaping Those Unsightly Noisy Elements

In creating the new parks, the Olmsted firm and the park officials were particularly eager to exclude the sights and sounds of the street. They objected to anything that they believed would interfere with the park experience. They did not object, however, to vehicular travel in the parks—as long as it was for recreational purposes. These concerns led them to seal the new parks off from their surroundings but also to advocate parkways for pleasure driving.

In contrast to Bushnell Park, the new parks were deliberately screened from the surrounding streets by thickly planted borders of trees and bushes. In keeping with the widely accepted design convention that began with New York’s Central Park, the Olmsted firm sought to give Hartford park visitors the illusion that they were not in a city at all, but in a forest meadow with trees all around. The Olmsted associate Charles Eliot went so far as to place earthen berms covered with shrubs along the streets that bordered or crossed Keney Park. Parks Superintendent Theodore Wirth included densely planted borders in his plans for Elizabeth and Rocky Ridge parks to “secure for the park the desired privacy,” and he extended these ideas to Bushnell Park, where he planted a riverside wall of greenery blocking the view of Asylum and Ford streets near the train station. When a park commission member wrote to complain that the plantings prevented passersby from enjoying the landscape, Wirth explained that this was intentional. Buffers of vegetation, he wrote, “are essential for the purpose for which a park in the city is created, for they hide out from the park those unsightly noisy elements from which a visitor expects to escape.” If people on Asylum Street wanted to see Bushnell Park’s scenery, they could come inside. Wirth added that “parks are not built as much to be looked at and to be hastily [sic] enjoyed by people passing by them on their daily walks or trips to and from business, as they are to form an attractive, pleasant retreat to all those that wish to escape from the noise, dust and crowded life of our city streets.”

Park officials consistently described heavy street traffic as incompatible with parks, but they vacillated in their treatment of purely recreational driving. Adams in 1890 rejected calls for additional driveways in Bushnell Park, explaining that “this area is chiefly valuable for the opportunity it affords for those who are tired of the noise, bustle, and dust of the streets of the city . . . Hence, the Park is most appreciated by pedestrians, and the passages of teams and vehicles, and proximity of clouds of dust raised by the whirr [sic] of wheels, is offensive in such a place.” On the other hand, a carriage ride through a park could be regarded as another way of enjoying the scenery. The Olmsted firm and the park officials included scenic drives that were open to carriages, horseback riders, and automobiles in most of their designs. Despite some problems with speeding motorists and with test drivers for the automobile manufacturing companies, the park commissioners saw no reason to prohibit pleasure driving.19

In 1896 park officials and the Olmsted firm began planning ways to link the parks through a system of recreational roadways. They hoped to assemble a long, winding belt of new parkways and existing streets stretching from Keney Park in the north through Elizabeth, Pope, Rocky Ridge, and Goodwin parks and terminating on Wethersfield Avenue near the city’s southern border. Like earlier parkways in other cities, those in Hartford would be landscaped greenbelts designed specifically for pleasure driving, in contrast to regular streets’ functions of accommodating commercial and streetcar traffic and providing access to private property. Nature lovers could enjoy a series of beautiful and constantly changing views from the seats of moving carriages as they rode in a great arc around Hartford. “Possibly, the two ends of the series of parkways may ultimately be at the right bank of the ‘Great River’ on the north and south sides of the City, respectively,” reported Charles E. Gross, the park commission president at the time.20

The parkways offered a new way of unifying Hartford geographically. Bushnell’s old dream of bringing everyone together in a central park was clearly obsolete in the sprawling new city, but late nineteenth-century park designers had found a way to mitigate the inherently divisive effect of giving each neighborhood its own park. The parkways would pull the separate parks together and help integrate a city increasingly divided by the housing choices of the affluent, the voluntary clustering of different ethnic groups, and the economically driven concentration of industry and of commerce. Unfortunately, the unity the park system was supposed to create was more theoretical than real. Even if the proposed system had been completed, it would have been experienced by most Hartford residents only as a collection of discrete parts. The image of unity provided
by a carriage tour of the system would have been available solely to the elite. Everyone else would have experienced just one park at a time, usually the one nearest home. The components of the park system would thus have further separated the residents of Hartford’s different sections, drawing them into contact with their neighbors, but not with people from other parts of the city, as Bushnell had hoped. These ramifications were either not seen or not acknowledged by park officials in the 1890s. The park commission hired the Olmsted firm to design the first links in the chain of parkways (a western section extending from Park Street along the north branch of the Park River to Girard Avenue in the West End, and a southern section reaching from Goodwin Park almost to the Connecticut River, forming a subcommittee under Charles Dudley Warner to oversee the work.21

Warner’s committee made almost no progress, possibly because of difficulties in acquiring land. The park commission soon abandoned the attempt to create the parkway between Park Street and Farmington Avenue, considering instead how to treat sections of existing streets as parkways. “The Parkways, when using the public highways, are subject to the city’s control, but may be beautified and widened and in many ways made different in appearance from the regular city streets,” wrote the commission’s president, Patrick Garvan, in 1899. For several years officials continued to talk about creating separate parkways, and plans were drawn up for at least two more sections of the original arc. As late as 1901, Wirth still expressed the hope that a parkway between Elizabeth and Keney parks could become “one of the main features of the park system.” In 1909 two disconnected sections of this parkway were laid out—Scarborough Street and Westbourne Parkway—but these became nothing more than residential boulevards lined with houses and distinguished from other streets only by their median strips. They fell far short of the original goal of being linear parks clearly distinct from the regular street system. By 1905 Wirth admitted that the creation of real parkways was “very doubtful.” Still, he refused to give up on the idea altogether. When controversy broke out over whether to extend a street through Pope Park, he saw an opportunity for a compromise that would create part of the future parkway system.22

The Pope Park controversy pitted real estate speculators and working-class homeowners who sought improved street access against elite reformers who wanted a strict separation between streets and parks. The issue arose in 1904 when property owners in the Behind the Rocks neighborhood worried that the newly completed park to their north would interfere with the residential development of their land. They feared that the park’s presence would prevent construction of streets linking their property with the factories on the other side of the park. Behind the Rocks was also cut off from the more densely developed neighborhoods to the east by a line of cliffs, and the Park River bounded it on the west. These accidents of location and urban development led property owners to claim that they were “bottled up.” They held a mass meeting at the neighborhood school and launched a petition drive to extend Laurel Street south across the park’s central meadow, on the grounds of “public convenience and necessity.” Gathering more than twelve hundred signatures, mostly from residents of the working-class neighborhood, they persuaded the Board of Street Commissioners to consider the project.23

The proposal outraged those who loved natural beauty. John Olmsted wrote that streets and parks represented incompatible principles, and that extending Laurel Street would destroy his artistic creation: “For the enjoyment of the views, continuity of the surface of the meadow is obviously of vital importance. Even though one can see across a street, the street itself and the vehicles passing upon it are incongruous and ugly circumstances... Much of the benefit of a visit to a park consists in the escape from the nervous strain due to ordinary city traffic, and to introduce such traffic into a park necessarily destroys much of the value of the park.”24

The Municipal Art Society led the fight against the Laurel Street extension in 1905. “It seems almost a right inherent in every man to have a place where he can see and walk upon the green grass and breathe to the utmost the free air untainted by the street smells, and away from the smoke and dirt and hurry of city life,” argued Louis R. Cheney and George Parker in the society’s protest to the street commissioners. “Without the parks the poor man must breathe his air and have his recreation on the doorstep or on the street.”25

Evidently worried that they would be seen as snobbish aesthetes with no concern for their social inferiors, Cheney and Parker did not dwell
on the general incompatibility of streets and parks; instead, they argued more specifically that Pope Park was the special property of the workingman and, as such, was an inappropriate place for any kind of road. “Pope Park is primarily the poor man’s park. Every other large park in Hartford has carriage-ways. In Pope Park they were intentionally omitted, it being the purpose of the designers to have one large park devoted to the convenience and pleasure of those who do not own carriages or automobiles. If Keney Park is for driving, then let Pope Park be for those who do not drive.” According to Cheney and Parker, workingmen wishing to reach the factory district on Capitol Avenue could simply walk or bicycle on paths across the park. Those who wanted to ride the trolley to the factories would find it just as convenient if the line ran to the west of the park on Bartholomew Avenue. Another trolley line could be built on the east side of the park to ease access to downtown. Instead of building a roadway across the park, the city should simply make improvements to the streets on its periphery.6 While Olmsted sought only to protect the park from the disruption of the street, Cheney and Parker advanced the idea of segregation in a different way: they declared a need for separating the park space of the rich from that of the poor.

“Would you have the houses of your city all alike? Would you have the rooms in your houses all alike, no matter what purposes they were used for? If not, then do not have your parks alike,” Parker wrote in a draft version of the appeal to the street commissioners. Pope Park was an important component in the proper development of that neighborhood, he argued. The working-class Frog Hollow area around Park Street could become “a sub-civic center and . . . a prosperous, happy community,” with Pope Park as its most desirable feature. Parker, unlike Wirth and the Olmsteds, had rejected the hopeless quest to make park space unify a fragmenting city. He now embraced division as a positive good and suggested that segregating park space would contribute to a desirable segregation of Hartford, allowing community to be reconstituted on a more localized level. Segregation was in the workingmen’s interests—whether they knew it or not.67 Parker soon took the even more radical step of emphasizing individual fulfillment over community, promoting segregation for that purpose.

Parker’s reinterpretation of segregated space dominated later discussion of the park system, but in 1905 the controversy over the Pope Park roadway continued to be argued mainly in the limited terms of separating the park from the street. Wirth, speaking at a special meeting of the Municipal Art Society in May, called for a compromise: a curving roadway following the contours of the land would be built through the park, but it would not become a “highway” that could be used by trolleys and other heavy vehicles. “Those who want to go by bicycle can be accommodated and those who want to go in carriages and automobiles ought to be willing to go a few feet out of the way in order not to destroy the Park,” he explained in a statement written two weeks later. Wirth’s proposed compromise satisfied neither side; they clashed at a public hearing in June. The priest from the neighborhood’s Catholic church, who was one of the leaders of the pro-street faction, argued that a regular street across the park would save workingmen ten or fifteen minutes in reaching the factory district and other parts of the city.68

The street board ultimately agreed on the parkway compromise despite months of bickering over how the street should be laid out. The narrow, curving roadway provided improved access for traffic from the factories to the working-class homes in Behind the Rocks, but no trolley line was allowed. The Municipal Art Society claimed this compromise was a victory for its adherents, although they had obviously failed in their attempt to keep all traffic out of the park.69 After this the defenders of the parks were more successful in preventing new street crossings. The ubiquitous Dotha Hillyer, for example, in 1913 led a successful protest against a proposal to extend Trumbull Street south across Bushnell Park.70

The advocacy of parkways by the Olmsteds and Wirth shows that they were not opposed to vehicular traffic per se. Their goal was to preserve the park as a distinct social environment by sealing it off from the disruptive aspects of the street that would remind visitors of the encircling city. Parker’s quite different ideas about segregated space eventually led him to reject the Olmsteds’ style of park design.

The Evils Which Parks Conceal

Most of Hartford’s parks were sealed off from the streets, but the city wasn’t in anyway—not just in the form of factory whistles heard in mulberry groves, or of ice wagons glimpsed through a hedge, but in the form of city people. Visitors brought with them the worst aspects of unruly
of the most frequent acts of vandalism was the smearing of excrement, sometimes in large quantities, on park buildings and benches. Much of the vandalism took place at night.  

Darkness marked a striking change in the character of the parks, paralleling—in greatly exaggerated form—the change that took place on downtown streets. Park officials strove with at least some success to create a sanctuary for public morality during the day, but nightfall brought the triumph of those values they most abhorred. At night the park was even worse than the street. It was not only the resort of drunks, tramps, and vandals; it was also a trysting place for lovers and for prostitutes and their clients. “The evils which parks conceal at night should be considered as well as the good they do in the day-time,” Parker wrote in 1906. “They seem to offer favorable opportunities for misbehaving between the sexes, strongly attracting those who do evil. It seems an ideal place for that ‘teasing and catting’ which precedes immoral acts, with people not already bad. This is often mistaken for courting, which rightfully belongs to young people, but differs from it as light does from darkness.” Riverside Park was a particularly popular place for nocturnal outdoor sexuality. In 1915, a few years after the closing of the nearby red-light district, it was described as “a headquarters for commercial prostitution in its lowest and most revolting forms.” Furthermore, the park restrooms, which were apparently left unlocked, were the site of homosexual encounters, and some children were reportedly lured there and sexually molested. And even more serious crimes occurred in the parks at night. A park official wrote in February 1908 that a newborn baby had been found dead in a park restroom. “This is the sixth baby that had been found on the parks within the last few years. . . . It seems to be a perfectly safe proposition to destroy a child and then leave them [sic] in the parks for the city to take care of.” In a confidential letter detailing such problems in 1915, the park commission president, Charles Welles Gross, urged greater police vigilance “for the protection of the innocent persons who frequent the parks for proper recreation and other lawful purposes and before an unseemly reputation attaches to the parks and to persons using them.”  

Park officials worried that the vandalism and vice revealed a deeper problem with the park environment that no amount of patrolling could solve. The mayhem encouraged their growing skepticism about the park
as a naturalistic refuge from the street. Officials came to believe that the secluded park enabled and even encouraged vicious activities. As a result, they removed much of the Olmsted's shrubbery from Riverside Park around 1906, "so that the entire territory is easily seen by the patrolman." By 1908 they had begun removing the border plantings at Pope Park for the same reason. Nighttime vandalism and vice had become so extreme that the working-class parks could actually be improved by opening them to the street. The parks department began installing lighting for security reasons around 1910, further diminishing the visible contrast with the streets.36

The whole idea of a naturalistic park in a working-class neighborhood was sadly misguided, Parker concluded. The vandalism in Pope Park was evidence that the park was "not fulfilling its mission," he wrote in 1910. "The park is at fault, and I would suggest, that partly as a remedy, but more because it ought to be done that the park may be used, that the grove between the river and Park Terrace be thoroughly lighted, an abundance of seats put in, tables, summer houses, pergolas and some simple games, that it may become useful to the people of this section and win their respect and care." The boys of the neighborhood should not be blamed too harshly for their vandalism. "Much of it is the result of the natural and normal instinct of the growing child. It is natural for them to climb trees, to cut whips and sticks, to get fruit and nuts and to do most of the things that have caused the injury to plant and shrub life." If vandalism had reached serious levels, it was evidence that the park was inadequately serving the instinctual needs of its visitors. "As a machine out of balance causes friction, unnecessary wear and cost to run, and in the end may destroy itself, so play facilities out of balance cause trouble, are costly, and the facilities provided are often destroyed. Generally, when there is discord or destruction in recreation or park work, it is because they are out of balance."37 More facilities for active recreation in the working-class parks were needed to save the park machinery from a systemic breakdown.

Balancing the Park Machine

Besides vandalism, public pressure for more active recreation also played a role in the redesign of the parks. Park officials had begun to realize the inadequacy of the Olmsted's plans almost as soon as the new parks were built, when park visitors voted with their feet. Pope Park, despite its location beside a densely-populated neighborhood, drew surprisingly few visitors except to the playgrounds and tennis courts at the northern end. The main section, south of Park Street, was particularly deserted. "Designed on country park lines, it soon proved the undesirability of maintaining such a park in that locality—it was a misfit," Parker recalled later. Riverside Park, on the other hand, was a great popular success. Its success was certainly not a result of the naturalistic landscaping with which the Olmsted's had tried to disguise spaces intended for active recreation, such as uneven borders of woods and scattered trees in the playing fields. "To begin with, these arrangements were fairly satisfactory, but with the introduction of the Vacation Schools and through their progressive and instructive development, it has become quite apparent that some changes in the future will be necessary," wrote Theodore Wirth in 1904, referring to the Civic Club's summer programs for slum children. Landscape beauty was of secondary importance to facilities for active play, and it had to be sacrificed in order to "meet the playful, sporty instinct of the playful, sporty youth."38

The Civic Club, which ran a Vacation School in Riverside Park, encouraged Pope Park's transformation into a space for active recreation as well. In 1900 the club proposed building an "out-door gymnasium" in Pope Park and hiring instructors. Though the club itself was an elite women's organization, it eventually attained its goal in 1902 after enlisting the support of members of the immigrant working class. Among those joining the Civic Club in its campaign were members of the Hartford Turnenbund, the local branch of a nationwide German-American movement that emphasized physical culture and ethnic pride.39 The outdoor gymnasium turned out to be extremely popular among young workers from the nearby factories. It drew large crowds every evening after the factories closed, though workers avoided the classes organized by the instructors. Lights were installed in 1909 to make the gymnasium better conform to the rhythms of industrial society. Parker declared that the outdoor gymnasium and the new playgrounds deterred vandalism by giving young men and boys something to do.40
their preferences in letters, petitions, and statements at public meetings. Baseball players wanted more diamonds, gymnasts wanted another outdoor gym, tennis players wanted more courts, and roller skaters wanted an outdoor rink. By 1914, there were twenty-six baseball diamonds, eighteen tennis courts, nine football gridsiron, and two nine-hole golf courses, in addition to facilities for lawn bowls, quoits, and croquet.\(^4\)

Not everyone shared the enthusiasm for sports. In parks claimed by the elite, active recreation and children’s games often annoyed the neighbors. “Afternoons regularly, there has been for some days a base-ball game consisting of twenty boys who have injured the shrubbery and worn the turf,” in the green at Washington and Lafayette streets, complained Henry Roberts in 1903. “You are well aware that this plot of land was given to the city by the residents adjacent to it. . . . Its desecration is a matter which has incensed very much those who have donated it to the city.” On the other hand, neighbors at Sigourney Square, a green in the plebeian part of Asylum Hill, took the opposite side in a crudely written 1913 petition: “We the undersigned residents of Ashley St, May St., Sargent St. and Sigourney St. our homes facing Sigourney Park heartily approve the permitting of the boys of our neighborhood playing ‘macaroni’ and other games in the park. It does not annoy us and the boys really ought to have some place besides the street corners to play games on, so we respectfully petition you to give the boys the necessary permission.”\(^4\)

Such differences could lead to conflicts when two groups sought incompatible uses for the same park space. In 1913 city officials prepared to open Pope Park to Sunday-afternoon baseball games in order to satisfy a long-standing desire among workers to play ball on their day off. City hall was quickly besieged with angry letters from Protestants in the Parkville neighborhood who resented the immigrant workers living on the opposite side of the park. “The people here, who go to the Park for rest, quiet and June air, will be denied that, if the rabble, which such sports always attract are there. Neither can there be any quiet for the residents within hearing distance. Sports of an athletic nature are unavoidably noisy,” wrote a Sisson Avenue couple. The Rev. John E. Zeiter, a Methodist pastor who had urged his congregation to protest, added that “by far the major portion of the best element of the people in this section are opposed to the use of Pope Park on the Sabbath day for athletic sports.”\(^4\)

The growth of spaces for active recreation in city parks produced huge increases in attendance from the late 1900s through the 1910s. Recreational facilities drew 521,000 visitors in 1913, and 2.8 million just eight years later—an average of twenty visits per Hartford resident. These increases threatened to transform the character of the outlying parks and produce further conflicts over their use. Elizabeth Park, originally laid out as a public garden in the suburban West End, became by the early 1910s one of the most heavily used parks in the city, with visitors arriving by trolley from distant neighborhoods. Park workers scrambled to accommodate the visitors by removing a tree nursery to create another lawn, turning a sheep pasture into a playfield, clearing out undergrowth in the woods to create picnic groves, and converting the sheep barn into a dressing room for ballplayers and a warming hut for ice skaters. “And yet with all this addition to the usable space, the park is becoming crowded,” Parker reported. He decided to expand sports facilities elsewhere to divert crowds from Elizabeth Park.\(^4\)

Parker Embraces Segregation

Struggling to accommodate the pressures on the park system, George A. Parker articulated a clear philosophy for the design of public space. His ideas were shaped by his deep ambivalence about the modern city, which he once described as “the horrible creature.”\(^4\) Born in 1853 in rural New Hampshire, Parker had received a spotty education but finally managed to graduate from the Massachusetts Agricultural College. He held a series of jobs superintending country estates and city parks before coming to Hartford in 1896 as superintendent of Keney Park. He served as Hartford’s superintendent of parks from 1906 until his retirement in 1926. A solitary, often lonely man, Parker described himself as “slow witted, without personal magnetism and usually disliked.” He devoted himself almost obsessively to his work, building a reputation as one of the leading park superintendents in America. In the 1900s and 1910s he held office in numerous local, regional, and national reform organizations.\(^4\)

Parker believed that the modern city lived a parasitic existence, draining the countryside of energy. The city could also devour its young; it threatened to corrupt children and, through the poisonous effects of the saloon, the brothel, and tobacco, to dump them on what he called “the human scrap heap.” Yet Parker believed that a determined effort by
Park Superintendent George A. Parker.
(Hartford in 1912)

the citizenry could tame the urban monster, suppress its most dangerous sources of immorality, encourage the growth of positive influences, and create “a sin-proof city.” Crucial to the success of such a struggle was the role of an enlightened city government in providing off-street recreational space, particularly in parks. He wrote:

I believe that parks have a message for the city: that they introduce the influence of the country into city conditions, and that this country influence is essential to the development of children into healthy men and women of normal physical, mental and moral strength, and to uphold adult people in a healthy condition. . . . The time has been when cities could depend upon the country to supply their demands for healthy and normal citizens, but with the rapid increase of the percent of those who live under urban conditions, the cities must be able to grow their own men and women from parents born and bred in the city.

In 1908, before making the major changes at Elizabeth Park, Parker had worried that the growth of active recreation was overwhelming the original function of parks, which he described in Bushnellian terms as “the influence they have upon every section of the city, that is, upon the city as a whole, and the unconscious influence they have upon all its people.” This influence, he said, “was in danger of being forgotten and largely destroyed in the desire to provide sports, playgrounds and other

conveniences for those who want to go to the parks in order to enjoy sports or do stunts.” Parker decided that he could solve this problem by sharply dividing the playing fields from the naturalistic landscapes. “Where special sports require special preparations of ground and exclusive privileges, distinct and separate areas should be obtained for them, and not introduced into those park areas which are pre-eminently for pictorial effect or for the recuperation of over-worked brain or strained emotions.”

In creating and expanding Elizabeth Park’s sports areas, Parker carefully placed them along the streets to serve as a buffer for the inner sanctuary, which included a celebrated rose garden. “The central portion of this park has been kept purely as a beauty spot, but around its borders are the facilities for recreation on the part of those who demand something more than mere beauty—a picnic grove, baseball diamonds, tennis courts, and a bowling green,” according to a 1915 article in Hartford Magazine. In this way Parker was able to accommodate both those who wanted to play ball and those who wanted to sniff the flowers in peace. He had found a way to make active recreation work to separate the hustle of the street from the serene contemplation of beauty.

Building on the idea of Pope Park as the “poor man’s park,” Parker worked to give each component of Hartford’s park system a distinct character. He had first tentatively advanced the idea of a class-specific system of neighborhood parks with urban amenities in a 1903 report to the American Park and Outdoor Art Association. In that report he had declared the need for park officials to provide the facilities—and allow the activities—desired by the neighborhood. He termed this system “communitism.” As park superintendent he rejected John Olmsted’s idea of administering a park system with a “unity of purpose and methods.” Instead, he became a kind of department store manager offering a full line of wares to a fragmented leisure market. Parker told Hartford magazine that proper park development required officials to be alert and responsive to the changing desires of park visitors. The widely varying tastes of these visitors meant that specialized spaces were needed. As he put it in his annual report that year, “I believe in a segregation of play activities by sex and age periods with suitable and separate provisions for each, with other provisions made for those to whom recreation means rest for tired
muses and brains.” Hartford magazine explained how these ideas had guided the development of the park facilities for different neighborhoods. “Hartford, for instance, has a large proportion of professional men, bankers, brokers, insurance clerks and others primarily engaged in brain work, and for such golf is the one great recreation, with bowling on the green and curling popular for certain sections in season.” Goodwin Park in the South End filled the needs of these men and also provided baseball diamonds to accommodate the growing enthusiasm for active recreation among the middle class. Parks in working-class neighborhoods were different: “Colt Park has been developed as the city’s great playfield and there it is that the younger element reigns supreme. . . . Pope Park, the center of a great manufacturing district, must also, from the nature of its use, offer diversified means for recreation and it has been developed to a considerable extent along the same line as Colt Park. . . . Riverside Park is, like Pope, the recreation spot for a great number of people, it being peculiarly the property of those who live east of Main Street.” Elizabeth and Bushnell parks were “beauty spots,” with other uses included as long as they did not interfere with the main function. Finally, “Keney Park is essentially for driving, riding or walking over, letting the influence of its beauty sink into one’s heart and mind, as Park Supt. Parker puts it.”

By professing such sentiments and claiming that the park system was the result of Horace Bushnell’s “prophetic vision,” Parker concealed how radically he and like-minded park officials of his era had redefined the purpose of the park. True, he sought to preserve the “unconscious influence” of naturalistic beauty and even saw a need for park space that, as he said, could serve as “a great outdoor living room for the people,” but he viewed these as discrete parts of a complex of park functions. While one consumer of leisure might choose to feel the immemence of God in nature, another would be nailing a line drive into right field, and a third would be eating ham sandwiches in the picnic grove. The park system would serve the special needs of each—in splendid isolation. By dividing Hartford’s people by recreational preference, age, and class, Parker had not simply revised Bushnell’s ideas. He had turned wholly against the spirit of everything Bushnell stood for. Now the parks would keep Hartford’s people as divided in their leisure time as they were at work or in their segregated neighborhoods. No longer intended to bring all of Hartford’s people into contact with one another, park space reflected the fragmented society of a modern industrial city.

The diverse recreational sites functioned as a coherent system only because of the streetcar—the same force that by encouraging outward development had made scattered parks necessary in the first place. The new parks were quickly connected to the streetcar system, and Goodwin Park, Keney Park, and Elizabeth Park even served as termini for trolley lines. The Hartford Street Railway Company promoted the idea of visiting outlying parks, undoubtedly in order to stimulate ridership. The trolleys therefore filled part of the integrative role that the Olmsteds and Wirth had envisioned for the parkways. Though the greenbelt plan had never been realized, preventing anyone from experiencing the park system as a continuous unit, the trolleys at least allowed all the parks to be reached from anywhere in the city, and many more people could afford trolleys than would ever have been able to indulge in carriage excursions. The trolley system made it possible for individual park visitors to leave the narrow confines of their neighborhood to seek whatever specialized
form of amusement was available in any park in the city. It freed individuals from geographic limits and undercut lingering hopes for rebuilding a sense of community on a neighborhood level.

Parker was far more appreciative of the trolley than the Olmsteds had been. "There is no question as to the desirability of having a good car service to the different [park] entrances," he wrote in a 1905 letter offering advice on the design of New Orleans' Audubon Park. "It seems to me that the time will come when the same or similar reasons which justified the introduction of carriage roads and bicycle paths may also justify the introduction of trolley cars" into the parks themselves. The trolley was "the wage-earner's vehicle, and it has as logical a place in large parks as carriage roads have for the rich man to drive on." The trolley could let passengers see "varied scenes of beauty," could distribute them through large parks, and could take them to playing fields and picnic grounds along the tracks.55

Despite his willingness to let the city enter the park in the form of sports, streetlights, and perhaps even trolleys (which were never actually extended into Hartford's parks), Parker still felt that city dwellers had a need for nature's healing influence. Yet he understood even the provision of natural influence in terms of a mechanistic system of urban amenities. "My conception of a park system might be compared to a City Water system, or to its system of streets; both are supposed to have direct connection with every home, and I believe a park system should be so connected," he wrote in 1910. "The public parks and squares might be compared to the reservoir of a water system, and the street trees and parkings to the main pipes, the front yard to the house service."56 Just as Parker's division of the parks into separate spaces was based on an understanding of park visitors as individual consumers, so this metaphor depicted homes as utility customers linked to an infrastructure. In any case, the city was to be united not in any direct, organic sense, but only through the mediation of an elaborate system created by experts.

Parker had created a more complicated definition of park space to replace the simple dualisms of nature and city, contemplation and action. Though at the time he became park superintendent he had contrasted the natural freedom of the parks with the artificial confinement of the streets, he quickly came to see the remaining difference between the two spaces primarily in terms of order and disorder. The purpose of the park was now first and foremost to provide orderly, specially designed recreational environments to suit the needs and personal tastes of the individual. "I believe that public parks with restricted uses can fulfill their mission more effectively than if not under restriction," he wrote in 1910. The freedom enjoyed by park visitors now consisted primarily of being able to choose from an array of recreational options.57

Parker, formerly hostile to the city, became in the 1910s bravely insistent on the social benefits that could be achieved by creating and managing orderly systems in recreation, education, traffic, and land use. In this way, he shared many progressive reformers' faith that rationalized administration could solve a wide range of problems. At the national and state levels, this aspect of progressive thought guided efforts for greater government regulation of interstate commerce, monetary policy, food and drugs, and working conditions. At the local level, belief in scientific administration encouraged attempts at greater municipal control of utilities and transit systems, as well as charter revisions that would shift municipal power to professional managers. The desire for bureaucratic order—often curiously intermingled with a secularized form of evangelical zeal—set progressives apart from previous generations of American reformers. Parker, impressed by the new ideas, looked forward to a time when they could cure the ills of the city and restore the promise of civilization. In about 1911 he wrote that American city governments do not yet "seem to manage in a thorough business like way or to use a more modern term 'with scientific efficiency,' but I seem to see through the fog of my ignorance, forms and purposes that are coming, as well as the receding forms which are going. I have great faith in the city. I believe in it. I feel that the future of the world for some centuries to come will be evolved from city conditions."58

Viewing parks now as places of order more than as places of nature, Parker in the 1910s opened them to some activities clearly associated with the street and the city. Among these was the creation of a race track to take the place of Washington Street. Once a quiet avenue lined with the homes of the city's elite, Washington Street had been a popular drive at least as far back as the late 1870s, as well as a well-known place for racing. Although the local equestrian enthusiasts had failed to stop the streetcar system from extending tracks across Washington at Park Street, most of the street was completely free of such obstructions. During the
1880s and 1890s, the street was the site of organized winter sleigh races on Saturday afternoons, drawing sleighs from all over Hartford and the surrounding towns. At these “matinees,” as they were called, the elite would show off their racing skill and the quality of their horses on the blocks between Park and Buckingham streets, in front of crowds of spectators. Longer races ran from Vernon Street to Capitol Avenue.⁵⁹

In the early twentieth century, however, Washington Street began developing into a major thoroughfare for north-south traffic. Horse lovers requested an off-street speedway reserved for their use and persuaded the park commission in 1908 to build one in Colt Park. When the parks department was unable to find enough inexpensive ashes to make the marshy site suitable, the racing enthusiasts asked that the speedway be built instead at Riverside Park. The commission considered the project so important that it granted the request even though it meant the destruction of two baseball diamonds, much to the annoyance of East Side ballplayers. To symbolize the abandonment of the old racing site, the Hartford Road Drivers’ Club held a parade of sleighs from Washington Street to the newly completed speedway on January 1, 1910. Horse races of various sorts continued to be held there until 1918, when a declining interest in horses led the parks department to put the track to other uses, including motorcycling.⁶⁰

In the years following World War I, Hartford’s parks offered activities that competed directly with commercial amusements. Ironically, one of the other advocates of this change was Dotha Hillyer, Horace Bushnell’s daughter. Hillyer noticed that “dancing on the green” had become a popular activity at the band concerts held in the parks, and she decided to promote this by installing a quarter-acre dance floor at Colt Park. In summer 1918 she urged the park commission to let her do something for the “grown-up boys and girls” who had come to Hartford to work in war-related industries and who needed respectable amusements outside working hours. The recreation director, S. Wales Dixon, supported the idea, saying, “It provides a clean, wholesome place of entertainment with the best of environment.” The dance floor opened that same year and was very popular through the 1920s, with as many as two thousand people a night paying admission. Parks officials arranged for a fourteen-member band to play every summer night, weather permitting. They

Outdoor dancing at Colt Park, 1918. The park offered a sanitized version of the respectable dance hall. (Hartford Public Library)

sought to create a sanitized version of a dance hall, with no lewd forms of dance and no “objectionable jazz features” in the music. Two supervisors, a man and a woman, would dance around the floor, discreetly warning dancers whose behavior was questionable. “As for jazz, we’re not very rigid in our rules in regard to that,” said Dixon. “The public likes it and we aim to please the public.”⁶¹

In summer 1919 the parks department also began showing movies. Thousands of people flocked to Colt Park to see the first free show and hear the accompanying orchestra. Most films were selected for educational value. Examples included government pictures that showed scenes connected with farm work and the work of the rangers in the forests,” reported the Hartford Courant. The experience of visiting the parks, once limited to a stroll in natural surroundings, now included watching nature on film.⁶²

Clearly, Parker differed from moral reformers like the Rev. Rockwell Harmon Potter, who had denounced the evil influence of the street and
had considered commercial entertainment as its extension. Potter had described commercial leisure as the malign antithesis of the park experience. Nannie Melvin, the protective officer of the Woman's Aid Society, argued that Hartford men needed sports in the parks, "free from commercialism," to improve their morals and to stop them from accosting self-respecting girls on the streets. Parker thought it was all just recreation, though of widely varying moral character. "Among other things the recreation of a city consists of resting, reading and visiting in the home, shopping, theaters and places of amusement, saloons, billiard rooms, clubs and places of 'hanging out,' walking the streets, public parks and playgrounds...and in a higher sense religious meetings and exercises," Parker wrote in 1911.

Like a merchant eyeing his competition, Parker calculated streets' recreational functions in 1915 and realized that the people of Hartford spent twice as much leisure time there as in parks.

The great attractions to human beings are other human beings, and people go with the crowd. The greatest recreation grounds that Hartford has, although it is not known as such, is Main Street, especially since it has been so well lighted. Here are about two miles of streets...which have cost Hartford as much as its park system with facades of large and beautiful buildings costing millions of dollars, and bordered with churches, saloons, restaurants, theaters, attractive stores and those things which attract and relieve the monotony of life; and more than all these, there are people, lots of them, on the street. Even though they do not speak in passing, yet as they move in and out among themselves, they gain strength, rest and relief from the monotony of repeating over and over again the daily task. Here is the great melting pot of Hartford. In a lesser degree, Asylum Street, Park Street, Front Street and Windsor Street serve a similar purpose. In these five great promenades of Hartford twenty million "human hours" of leisure time are spent yearly. They make for its good and for its evil.

This passage seems, at first reading, like a refutation of Frederick Law Olmsted's oft-quoted description of walking through crowded city streets. By watching out for other people and maneuvering to avoid collisions, Olmsted had said in an 1870 speech, "our minds are thus brought into close dealings with other minds without any friendly flowing toward them, but rather a drawing from them." Parker evaluated the walker's experience less negatively, using different criteria. He claimed that passing encounters with other people would restore the work-wornied individual, but he said nothing about whether this encounter would produce social harmony. Unlike Olmsted and Bushnell, he did not see that as a relevant issue. The important thing was to see that each person found wholesome, orderly recreation.

Until Parker redesigned the park system in the 1910s, Hartford's parks had reflected almost exclusively the interests of the elite and the middle class. Bushnell had sought to create civic unity on bourgeois terms—working-class people were welcome in his outdoor parlor in order that they might gain finer sensibilities and relate harmoniously with their superiors. The active recreation the working class desired was forbidden in Bushnell Park in the 1860s and was slighted in the designs for the new parks of the 1890s. Under George A. Parker, however, the park system evolved into a collection of neighborhood parks aimed at serving each area's predominant socioeconomic group. Parks were further subdivided into smaller spaces to satisfy the diverse needs of individual visitors.

Such a change was welcomed and even instigated by the working classes. The segregation of parks and the space within them gave Hartford's working classes a new voice in shaping their own recreational facilities. They transformed certain park spaces to reflect their accustomed ways of the streets, uses including vigorous games and even crime and vandalism. As Parker yielded to these pressures, other park uses came to include new activities associated with interior space—no longer merely the genteel space of the "outdoor parlor," but also the plebeian dance halls and movie theaters that had once been derided as coarse, commercial amusements.

By abandoning the attempt at recreational unity, Parker returned to the original idea of inclusion—with a completely changed meaning. Virtually all of Hartford's people could find something in the parks to suit their tastes, and they could enjoy themselves without interference from those with different tastes or different class backgrounds. To some extent,
therefore, Parker was right in suggesting that segregation was in the interests of everyone. By keeping disparate groups of people apart, the redesigned park system minimized conflict. It prevented an endless struggle over whose version of proper behavior would prevail, and an equally futile struggle to stifle nonconformity. Parker had given up on Bushnell's hope that the park would be an unstructured natural environment that would bring back the face-to-face relations and harmonious society of an idealized rural past. Personal encounters could have only limited effects in the dispersed, class-segregated city that Hartford had become, and a new model of the social environment was needed. Parker chose the model of rational organization that urban institutions and infrastructure provided, and he accepted the existence of a pluralistic society. In place of the stark spatial antithesis between park and city envisioned by the Olmsteds and by Wirth, Parker created a fine-grained division of space to bring order to a profusion of recreational tastes.

Arriving in Hartford in the summer of 1923, a nine-year-old Russian Jewish boy found that the fastest way to fit in was to play in the street with the other children. "I became one of 'the boys' in short order," Morton Tenken recalled years later. "The language came very easily to me, especially swearing, and I acquired this part to perfection. I had to learn how to fight, play ball and piggy, gamble with tops, play jack-knife, marbles, and last but not least, how to raid fruit and peanut wagons at night and steal candy from store counters. This was known as having fun and being brave. Any boy not taking part was dubbed a 'sissy' and became virtually ostracized." 1

Boys in the immigrant wards of the city had for decades enjoyed a rowdy street culture that set them against the adult world. At one end of the range of play were harmless games like ring-o-levio, piggy, pony, hide-and-seek, and marbles—games in which boys claimed the streets and the sidewalks for their own use, to the occasional annoyance of adults. More daring boys would steal rides on streetcars and delivery wagons. But play