

Hazel Conway and Paul Rabbitts, *People's Parks. The design and development of public parks in Britain* (London: John Hudson Publishers, 2024), 352 pp, with more than 400 colour and black-and-white images.

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Although originating in the distinct socioeconomic, environmental and political context of the Victorian period, public parks remain as fundamental to 21st-century urban life as they were two centuries ago. Yet, despite this celebrated endurance and continued relevance, the future viability of Britain's public parks is by no means certain.

It is within this context that *People's Parks: The design and development of public parks in Britain*, by Hazel Conway and Paul Rabbitts, arrives. The book is a timely and sensitive update by Rabbitts of the seminal work published in 1991 by Conway, who passed away in 2017.

People's Parks is an accessible, insightful read and provides an intoxicatingly rich resource for urban parks researchers, practitioners, policymakers and enthusiasts alike. The book draws from impressively comprehensive and diverse sources, including academic research, policy reports, archives and subject-matter experts, as well as Rabbitts' own vast professional experience in the parks sector. Building on Conway's original work, Rabbitts meticulously evidences the evolution, contribution and precarity of public parks in spatial, conceptual and cultural terms.

In addition to making the case for the continued necessity of the public parks concept, *People's Parks* highlights the adaptability of these spaces, including through health, war and environmental crises. The book also emphasises the vulnerability of these spaces, particularly to unstable funding models and management challenges, but also to increasing pressures from growing user demands and environmental degradation. As such, *People's Parks* makes a clear argument for sustained investment in public parks if these spaces are to continue being integral to British life, national heritage, and human and ecological health.

The first 11 chapters of *People's Parks* largely mirror the 1991 publication. While Conway's work never feels outdated, Rabbitts skilfully adds to these chapters' contemporary relevance with insights, examples and extended detail. For example, chapter 6, "Lodges, Bandstands and the Cultivation of Virtue," is enhanced with intricate description and examples of the diverse design, use and histories of pagodas and bandstands in parks. Inclusion of a tremendous array of photos, maps and other illustrations – the majority from Rabbitts' private collection – further enriches the revised edition.

Rabbitts remains steadfastly true to the spirit of Conway's influential book, yet makes his own distinctive imprint, notably through the contribution of five new chapters that advance understanding of the history and development of Britain's public parks to the present day.

New chapters address the cycle of investment and decline these municipal spaces have experienced; changing funding models and perspectives of parks management; and the complex, evolving multifunctionality demanded of urban parks today. For example, a new chapter covering garden cities and the new towns movement connects the motivations and ethos of parks with delivery of a greener urban environment overall. New material on the emerging discipline of town planning provides further insight into how the parks movement shaped urban and suburban development, including the use of parkways and greenbelts. Meanwhile, an elaborately researched section addressing the removal of park gates and railings to contribute scrap metal for the war effort adds fine detail to this long-debated topic.

People's Parks positions these spaces and the shifting responsibilities of parks professionals within wider processes of social, economic, cultural and political change. For example, Rabbitts charts the rise and demise of the park keeper, including the impacts this had not only on parks departments and professionals, but also on the connection between communities and their parks. The book also situates parks within the compound crises facing cities, in Britain and beyond,

namely climate, biodiversity and health crises. In doing so, it acknowledges the complex – and at times unrealistic – expectations foisted on parks and green spaces in the 21st century.

People's Parks can lean heavily into nostalgia, expressing a longing for a period of park management that realistically cannot be replicated – or that may not be desirable by all. For example, a chapter detailing the careers, achievements and legacies of municipal park designers does not mention a single woman nor acknowledge that public parks predominantly were built, managed and maintained by a narrow demographic, which continues to affect park provision and use today.

People's Parks also can wrestle with the connection between historic parks and contemporary spaces, even though the revised edition removed “Victorian” from Conway’s title. For example, the book celebrates Mile End Park in Tower Hamlets, London, for “shedding its Victorian industrial heritage” (p. 274), yet also laments “that the work of our Victorian forefathers was gradually being undone” (p. 264).

To underscore how this Victorian-era innovation retains contemporary significance, *People's Parks* could further unpack the legacy of historic parks on how the “movement as a whole” (p. 216) adapts to 21st-century needs, such as by serving as urban-cooling infrastructure. And, examining how evolving approaches to urban sustainability – such as those manifested in policies regarding high-density and active travel – affect conceptualisations and delivery of urban parks could deepen appreciation for the complex role these urban spaces are expected to play.

People's Parks could be even bolder in connecting the severity of reductions in parks funding with the decline in provision of other local government services, such as adult and child social care and healthcare. Doing so could powerfully underscore *People's Parks*’ critical point that allowing parks to decline affects more than the spaces themselves, but rather has a magnified ripple effect across communities.

Yet, *People's Parks* does not gloss over the mounting challenges that have beset parks as a discretionary municipal service. Emphasising the hard reality facing local authorities across Britain, the book calls out policies, programs and political ideologies, from austerity to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), that have made the capacity to sustain these valued public spaces a constant battle.

In the final chapter, Rabbitts fires a warning shot – supported by evidence from academic researchers, practitioners and organisations, such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund – about the uncertain future facing Britain’s parks. Rabbitts is direct in “stating the obvious to the oblivion” (p. 285): We let public parks decline at our peril. If the work so expertly laid out by Rabbitts and Conway in *People's Parks* does not convince readers of the critical contributions of and continued need for investment in these spaces, nothing will.

Dr Meredith Whitten

London School of Economics & Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE

07810143326, m.whitten@lse.ac.uk

Dr Meredith Whitten is a Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research focuses on the intricate, evolving and often contested relationship between cities and nature. In particular, she focuses on how green space is integrated into the urban environment to address processes of urban change. Meredith has international experience in public policy and planning, including working on green space issues. She also serves as Research Advisor to Parks for London. Meredith holds a PhD in Regional and Urban Planning from the LSE.