



Space— the social change frontier

Exploring open spaces, parks, gardens, and trails as tools for social impact

By **Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** | Metropolitan Group Creative Director/President

We often think of spaces as civic furniture— aesthetic break points in the urban landscape, functional places for picnics and BBQs, and quality-of-life amenities that are described in real estate brochures as *nice* (as in “good schools, nice parks”). But deep down, we know that they are much more than nice. As a society, we are remembering the fundamental power of place to meet human and community needs, and we are beginning to put this knowledge into action once again.

Now, I have just used words like *remembering* and *again*. I do so intentionally because, while I am about to explore how we can and should think, act, frame and communicate differently about spaces and places, I believe we are harkening back to the ways communities have acted and understood for millennia, and have only recently forsaken. I am frankly channeling the vision and voice of Pinchot, Muir, Olmsted, and others.

I am a true believer in the power of place as a critical tool for social impact, and in cultural institutions as pivotal actors and leaders in the movement to harness this power for impact.

We live in an increasingly urbanized and interconnected world. Where time, place, and culture compact our lives and our expectations of how we move in the world—where we go, and what we do. And increasingly our communities are physically and culturally disconnected from land and nature, and from the benefits that come from connection with both.

In the last five years, the number of humans living in urban settings has overtaken the number living in rural areas. It took millennia for twenty-five percent of the world’s population to move into cities. It took only fifty years to get to fifty percent. In America today, nearly 80% of people live in cities. We are losing land at an alarming rate, with more than 2 million acres of land lost every year to sprawling development (that’s equivalent to 3,789 football fields every day). Concurrent with this trend, we are experiencing significant increases in obesity and chronic disease, which extract draconian human and economic costs. We witness concerning drops in air and water quality, with

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their commensurate impact on human health and increasing economic disparity. While causality vs. correlation is neither universally accepted nor irrefutable, it is clear that changes in our human settlement patterns, quality of life, access to core environmental services (clean and healthy food, water and air), and our societal expectations are all moving in a direction—counter to our common sense, our needs, and our desires.

It is at this crossroads that a visionary and vital “spaces and places” movement can tip the scales, deliver impact, and move from *nice* to *necessary*. By understanding and meeting human and community needs, and by effectively communicating relevance and benefits, we can build an effective *power of place* movement.

Understanding and meeting community needs

Parents, community leaders, public health officials, and environmentalists are concerned about access to healthy food. For 10,000 years our food system was 100 percent organic and nearly 100 percent local. In the last 50 years, it has become an international commodity, often processed beyond recognition and sold far from where it is produced. Food insecurity, food deserts, and the food industrial complex are not mere buzzwords and wonkish tropes, they are realities that impact the physical, economic, and environmental well-being of people and communities. But the power of place movement is starting to make a difference. From Houston to Brooklyn¹ and from Portland² to Detroit, vacant lots, surplus public land, and school grounds are being turned into community gardens. They are creating access to affordable and healthy food while building a connection between people, their food, and the land. These efforts are as small in scale as an activist taking over vacant lots and organizing neighborhood volunteers to grow food or as large as municipalities like Multnomah County, establishing a large-scale

farm with surplus land to grow tons of fresh produce for the food bank. But where is the leadership to expand these examples to a way of doing things? Where is the expertise to provide training and tools to ensure healthy and stable urban crops? Is this a role for public gardens, parks, land trusts and other organizations with the needed knowledge and skills?

In many cities, access to **clean water and air** is an increasing concern, both from the standpoint of current safety and from a longer-term need for supply driven by population growth. We forget that we live in a closed ecosystem, and that the water we drink and the air we breathe must be cleaned and recharged – a process which is most effectively done through natural systems. Green space, urban trees, biofiltration³, and natural treatment of runoff are all underutilized and cost effective approaches to treating air and water and creating tangible, human-scale understanding of how we must change our use patterns. Many urban areas are bracing for critical water supply shortages in the coming decades. How can the expansion, design, operation, and programming of gardens and green spaces address this issue? Can we design them to capture water and recharge the aquifer? Can we demonstrate and inspire changes in landscape design that conserve water? Can we lead development of microwetlands, biofilters, and catchments across the community? Can we form partnerships, lead public engagement, and build public will in a way that shifts our communities’ expectations, behaviors, and water use patterns? Can we ask the same set of questions regarding increasing the numbers of carbon fixing plants and trees, shifts in transportation options, and other choices that directly impact air quality? Or should the question be, can we afford *not* to?

In just a few generations, we have moved away from an **active lifestyle** being the norm, with

passive exercise being intrinsic to transport, work, and play. Whether it's our one-stop shopping at superstores rather than walking between shops, or the difference between kids "going out to play" and "having screen time," the transformation has been dramatic. And these changes create an all-encompassing reinforcement for a sedentary lifestyle. This must change. And parks, trails, gardens, and open spaces are the key⁴. We need safe and inviting transit corridors and connectors to schools, workplaces, and services that make our daily trips more convenient, healthy, and fun to power by foot and bike than by internal combustion engine. We need open and green spaces where kids can play and people of all ages can move. And, they need to be in situ – located within a 10-minute walk of where people live and work. We need inspiring places in every community that draw people outside to connect with nature, explore, and simply wander. Who will provide leadership to ensure place and space are at the table as part of our public health discourse?

And of course, in our mobile and increasingly multicultural society, where what divides, isolates, and separates us is amplified everyday, we need a sense of community and connection. The universal language of natural beauty, combined with the functional role of many parks, open spaces, and gardens as the commons, invites the organic development of community and of shared identity. Just visit Millennium Park in Chicago, and watch as the most diverse socio-economic, demographic, and psychographic cross-section of America interacts and connects through play at Crown Fountain or The Bean. You cannot help but ask, "How can we move this authentic sense of us into the broader civic square?" The same can be said of Golden Gate Park or the National Mall in Washington, D.C., or thousands of other places across the country. But as our population has grown, our lives urbanized, and our open space

diminished, we have not made a commensurate investment in places that connect, inspire, and tell our stories. Who will champion this need, provide for this deeply held human desire, and deliver the powerful blend of value and values that creates meaning? No one is better positioned at the intersection of place and community than our gardens and parks.

Of course, the list of necessity-based work advanced by the power of place could go on to include preserving bio-diversity, delivering other ecosystem services, driving economic prosperity, and increasing economic equity—but you get the point. Place and connection to land are fundamental to meeting core human and community needs.

Communicating relevance and benefits

The greatest barriers to advancing this power of place movement often come down to our own language and frames. We're a community that is led by science. Our organizations often overtly focus on our fiscal needs, development opportunities, and programmatic work; assuming that our impact, rationale, and value/values connections are implied and understood. We focus on telling our story rather than listening to and understanding communities, engaging their voices, and serving as a platform to express their stories. To succeed, we need to focus on several important communication watchwords:

Stakeholders, not audiences: If we treat people as our "audience," we present to them, offer them transactional opportunities, and establish relationships that are often one-way streets.

If we see and approach people as stakeholders who have a vested interest in our mission and ownership of the outcomes, we garner investment and commitment, as well as feedback that helps identify solutions.

Engagement, not awareness: Too often our desire in the place-based movement is to build awareness along the lines of, “If only people better understood conservation, the need for parks, etc., they would change their behavior and better support our work.” But what we need is *engagement*—stakeholders need the agency to express their perspective and vision, to impact decision-making, to have legitimate claim to our leaders’ attention and to help design the choices and priority setting that managing natural resources and places require.

Listen and lead with alignment to values: By really listening to what people and communities need, and by understanding the values they hold related to open and natural places, we are able to authentically articulate the relevance of place. To capture attention, demonstrate import, and drive action by others, we must meet them where they are and in ways that connect to their priorities and motivators.

Emotion trumps data: In the conservation and place-based arena, we are true believers in the power of science and the ethos of getting the full story before we can arrive at rational decisions. Unfortunately, that is not how most people make decisions. Most of us decide what we are going to do based upon emotion, and then rationalize the choice with data. Luckily, we can connect emotionally about the power of place and provide easy access to the data that backs up our case. Advocates for place have an incredible asset—people already have an emotional connection to land and nature.

Ultimately, we need to consider shifting our focus from building institutions to building a movement that shatters silos. Is our sphere the garden? The park? The nature preserve? Are we really conservationists, preservationists, foresters, land managers, and horticulturalists? Perhaps, but we are also public health champions, community visionaries, and advocates for

healthy, sustainable, and meaningful lives and communities. By focusing on meeting broader needs with the power of place, we accomplish our conservation missions, establish our work as an absolute necessity, and build an effective movement.

Links:

- ¹ Brooklyn: <http://www.bqilt.org/TheGardens.html>
- ² Portland: http://www.oregonlive.com/news/index.ssf/2009/06/garden_benefiting_food_bank_pl.html
- ³ Biofiltration: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biofilter>
- ⁴ Key: <http://www.tpl.org/publications/books-reports/ccpe-publications/fitness-zones-to-medical-mile.html>



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