

Humanizing the Urban-Industrial Environment

by Laurence C. Gerckens, AICP

One hundred and fifty years ago most American urbanites lived within a mile or two of the open countryside. Farms, woodlands, streams and trees were ready adjuncts to urban life and were immediately available. But massive European immigration in the late 1840s coupled with the arrival of the railroad at mid-century had an explosive impact on the scale of the city, pushing the natural environment far from the everyday life of the city dweller.

In the 1850s, New York acquired Central Park to provide a "Greensward" — a district of the city intended to be permanently rural in character — to reacquaint the city dweller with the environment of green grass, woodlands, lakes and fields that was being lost to urban development.

A vast expansion of dense city blocks into the countryside occurred with the arrival of the electric trolley car in the 1880s. "Country" was now something city dwellers would travel miles to experience. But country (or "sub-urbia" — areas developed below the level of urbanism) came to be reserved for those who had the leisure time and income to afford it — each suburbanite owning his or her own little piece of green at the edge of the city.

In the late 1880s, Frederick Law Olmsted, the Elder, a landscape architect from Cambridge, Massachusetts, undertook construction of the "emerald necklace" park system in Boston, preserving the Back Bay Fens as an urban open space, linking a number of green areas in a lineal pattern of parkland that "draped" like a necklace around the City of Boston.

In 1893, in Kansas City, Missouri, landscape architect George Kessler suggested a metropolitan parks plan for the city that extended far into the surrounding countryside. He argued that acquisition of parkland strips ("paseos") in remote farmland prior to development would be far less expensive than acquiring parkland after the



The Bronx River Parkway and Parkway maintenance crew.



WESTCHESTER COUNTY (NY) ARCHIVES

area had developed. These interconnected "greenways" would assure

provision of open space for future populations, and would be excellent locations for roadways, lending access through green areas to future neighborhoods, while bringing the natural environment back to the daily experience of the urbanite.

Charles Eliot, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, eagerly grasped these principles to extend Olmsted's "emerald necklace" idea to the entire Boston Metropolitan Area, realizing the nation's most extensive regional greenway system by the turn of the century. Boston, with the guidance of Olmsted and Eliot, and Kansas City, fulfilling the vision of George Kessler, became the leading greenway-based cities as America entered the twentieth century.

The concept of structuring the American city through provision of narrow green travel corridors, generally following waterways, received considerable impetus with construction of the Bronx River Parkway at the end of the First World War. Extending northward from New York City into Westchester County, the Bronx River Parkway, America's first "parkway," became the model for a system of parkways lacing through all of Westchester County that was

adopted in the 1920s. This, in turn, inspired the Long Island parkway system realized in the '20s and the '30s, and the Interstate highway system that linked all of America with auto-focused greenways.

The greenway was a method for preserving stream beds and river bottoms from development, for assuring the continued experience of green spaces, trees and fields in the daily travel patterns of urbanites, and for providing safe limited-access travel ways connecting the far-flung parts of megalopolis. The greenway lent the appearance of "naturalness" to an industrialized America, provided recreational open space close in to urbanized districts, and softened the hard edges of an industrialized state.

There are great opportunities at the local scale to acquire greenways for auto travel, for pedestrian ways, and for bicycle paths through the comprehensive community planning process, through "dedication" requirements in land subdivision control, and through planned unit developments. The greenways given to the people of Kansas City and Boston over a hundred years ago are still giving to the people of those cities today. A greenway could be your contribution to creating a more humane America. If not us, who? If not now, when? It will only be more difficult and more expensive in the future. ♦

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weeks basis," and is a frequent speaker at local, state, and national planning conferences through his company, The ON-CALL Faculty Program, Inc. of Hilliard, Ohio. Gerckens, who discussed "Community Aesthetics and Planning," in Issue 7 of the *Journal*, will periodically be providing historical perspectives on current planning issues.

Kansas City's Parks & Boulevards

From: The Outlook Magazine, Dec. 10, 1910

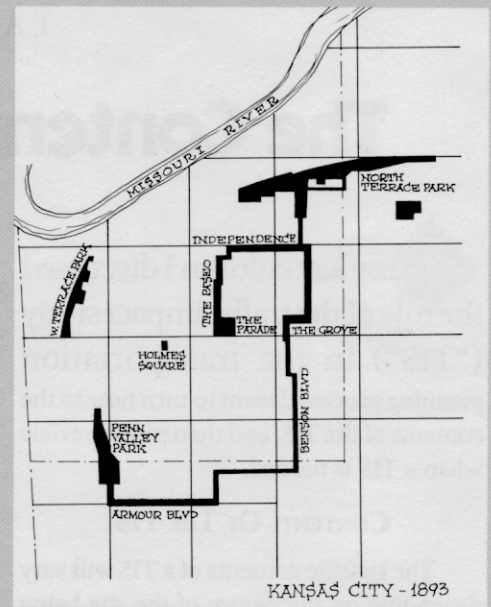
Another striking instance of the commercial value of beauty of landscape has appeared in the development of the remarkable system of parks and boulevards that has been established in Kansas City, Missouri ... In the recently published report of the Board of Park Commissioners of that city, Mr. George E. Kessler, landscape architect for the Board asserts that, while the system of parks and boulevards has cost ten million dollars, "the property fronting on these boulevards has been advanced by them more than that amount." This statement is based on a careful investigation conducted with the co-operation of real estate dealers.

When the system was projected ... the opposition to it from property-owners was so intense that several years of hard fighting for legislation in the State and city governments,

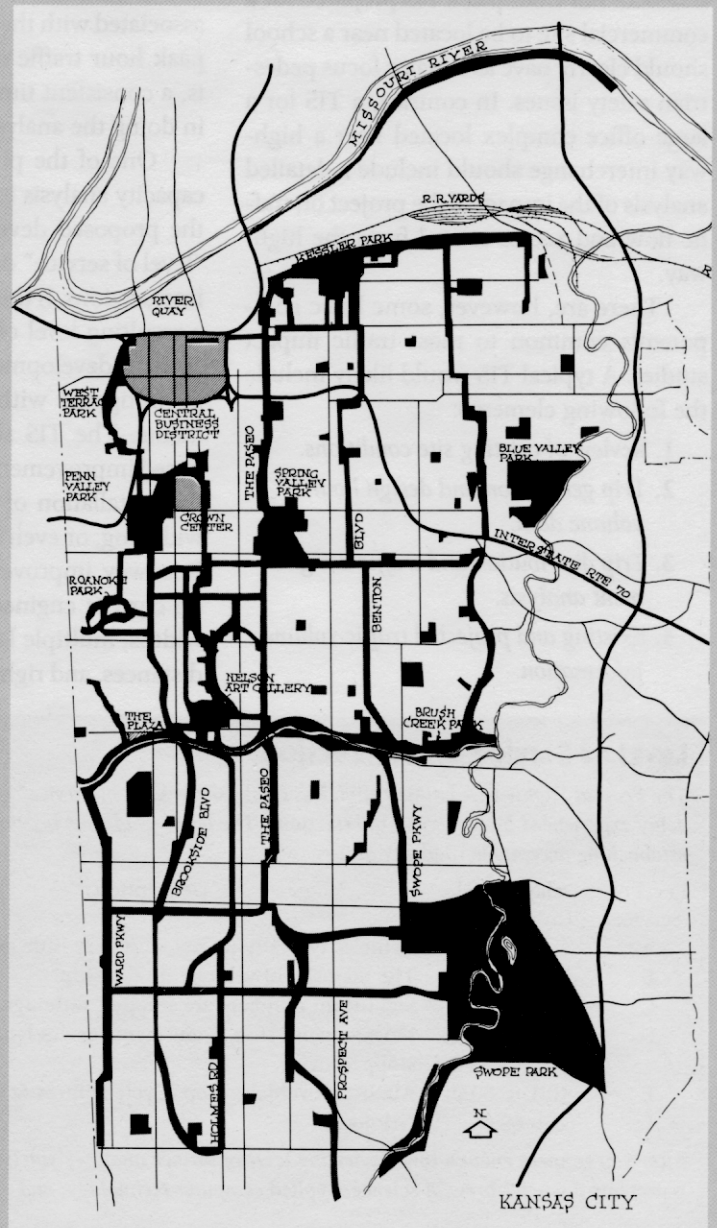
and later in the courts, was necessary before the work could begin. The system ... has been paid for on the benefit-district system—that is, the cost in each case has been assessed against property in a limited district that has been benefited by the improvement.

Now, as additions are made to the city, many property-owners desire to plat the ground to include boulevards, to dedicate and build such boulevards at their own expense, and deliver them finished to the city. The work, of course, is done under the supervision of the Park Commission.

The change in attitude toward the park and boulevard system has been due in part to the elevation of public taste, which now demands beauty in city building. But an exceedingly important factor has been the discovery that beauty is an asset that can be realized on commercially.



Map in upper right is George Kessler's 1893 plan for a park system in Kansas City. The map to the right is drawn to the same scale showing parks, parkways and boulevards as they exist in Kansas City today. As the city has grown by annexation, the original open space forms have been extended. North Terrace Park is now appropriately Kessler Park. The Paseo has been made to run south ward almost to the limits of the present-day city. In Brush Creek park as well as in the parkways, Kessler's lesson of capturing natural features for open space has been well followed. (From *Open Spaces* by August Heckscher, reprinted with permission from the Twentieth Century Fund, New York).



The Paseo in Kansas City, 1916.