

A Park for the 21st Century: Observations on the Transformation of Mile End Park*

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But when people's ideas move closer on a set of issues, history teaches us that they can be given powerful expression despite geographical and intellectual distance. Ideally a new movement comes out of new ideas being specified in particular places—then there may be a model being expressed which is adaptable to the interests of other places and scales of operation. These can be ideas relating to long- or short-term real interests and policies which express them.

—Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope*, 1989.

Introduction

Dominant trends in the southeast of England after ten years of New Labour government seem to leave little scope for optimism right now. Neoliberalism is deeply entrenched and is actively shaping values, attitudes and practices while undermining public institutions and services. About 70 percent of the population is materially wealthier than ten years ago. But personal debt and “time-poverty” are now serious issues, and social inequalities have widened. Moreover, despite recently resigned British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s pretension to make the U.K. a beacon in the fight against climate change, he totally failed to lead by personal example and showed little conception of the type of policy and cultural shifts required. Record consumption last Christmas was presented in the media as cause for celebration rather than concern. Car use and air travel continue to increase. And, the flawed Prescott plan, which sought to address housing shortages, has led to an indiscriminate building boom that shows an extraordinary failure of imagination about shaping the built environment in relation to the needs of either low-income households or sustainable futures.

Yet, notwithstanding this depressing social and political landscape, all sorts of experiments have been occurring at the micro-level. The challenge of envisioning alternatives has been taken up by households, protest groups, independent organizations, and, in some cases, local authorities. In the interstices of dominant trends, these actors have been pursuing a range of progressive, usually small-scale, projects and initiatives: from household recycling and bartering networks to energy-efficient buildings and new woodlands. Socialism and the ideal of equality may have disappeared from political vocabularies, and green is still routinely used as a term of dismissal connoting hopeless idealism, a return to the past, or unacceptable expense or sacrifice. But as Kate Soper has stressed in relation to consumers as citizens, these actors have been “doing their bit” for the public good, the environment, and future generations anyway. Moreover, their actions are not necessarily based on ethical or altruistic motives. Contrary to neoliberal equations between personal satisfaction and private goods, such actions often express desire and appreciation for the individual benefits of collective, public goods.

This essay focuses on one such micro-level initiative which may give some hope to anyone concerned with social justice, sustainable practices, and broadening ecological literacy. It is about a project to turn a neglected patchwork of open space in the East End of

London into “a park for the 21st century.” It documents and analyzes the transformation of Mile End Park—a transformation I witnessed during regular visits to the neighborhood from 1990 onwards. Based on sustainable principles and a bold, participatory approach to urban landscaping, this award-winning project has condensed multiple functions: it has enhanced local residents’ everyday lives and fostered biological diversity while revitalizing public space and creating a stronger sense of place.

Antecedents

Although the transformation of Mile End Park took place between 1995 and 2000, the idea had been around for over 50 years and dates back to the 1940s. It was first envisaged by J.H. Forshall and Patrick Abercrombie within their 1943 County of London Plan—a plan heralded by the leader of the London County Council as a means to transform “the great wen” into a capital city worthy of the Empire and the Commonwealth. Open spaces were at the core of the planners’ vision and their attack on “drabness and dreariness.” They aimed to construct open spaces around communities and an interlinking system across London:

The Park system devised to provide the minimum local needs for London communities also aims at a co-ordinated plan of open spaces for the whole area, linking up existing parks and particularly the central ones with each other and eventually with the Green Belt and open country. To this end any wedges of open land which are still found penetrating into the built-up area should be rigorously preserved.

Forshall and Abercrombie’s stress on “minimum *local* needs” marked a significant break with the aggregate base used by pre-war planners in London, which had masked gross inequalities in the distribution of open space. Shaped by the egalitarian ethos that inspired the post-war welfare state, their vision rested on two standards devised to ensure equity. First, everyone should have access to open space within half a mile of their home; and second, there should be a ratio of four acres open space per 1,000 residents in each borough. Application of these standards established the East End as a priority in implementing the plan: it encompassed four boroughs with some of the worst open space/population ratios in London: Bethnal Green, Poplar, Stepney and Shoreditch. The only park of significance was Victoria Park, up in the northeast corner.

These poor ratios were no coincidence. They were legacies of historical processes that had shaped the East End during the previous two centuries, when London had become the center of global trade and finance. Although bounded by the square mile of the City of London, the urbanization of the open fields and marshes between the villages of Mile End, Poplar and Tower Hamlets (still evident on mid-18th century maps) was shaped by the expansion of the port. By the mid-19th century, tenements had proliferated, and the East End had become home to the “undeserving poor.” While Poplar and Limehouse were notorious for brothels, gin halls, opium and gambling dens, neighborhoods further from the Thames were characterized by a mix of small industries and workshops servicing the new docks and devoted to textiles, tailoring and furniture making—all of which capitalized on cheap migrant labor. As the bourgeoisie vacated their Georgian terraces in former villages, the laboring population they left behind was impoverished, fragmented and unpoliticized. Casual labor was the norm, and in contrast to the industrial working class in northern cities,

neither non-conformist churches nor incipient trade unions had much presence until late in the century.

If parks can be seen as emblems of civic pride, it is unsurprising that none of note was established in the East End during the second half of the 19th century or the early 20th century. The “dangerous classes” of “outcast London,” so feared by the public authorities and wealthier classes, were simply too exhausted to engage in the sort of civic campaign that had led to the creation of Victoria Park in 1841. And although World War I marked a decline in bourgeois fear and self-righteousness, the partial slum-clearances that followed in the 1920s and 1930s showed little creative vision—as the utilitarian red brick blocks still standing today testify. Moreover, as with any port area and first place of arrival for immigrants, dreams of upward mobility were less about local improvement than moving on either collectively (as in the case of the Jewish community) or individually: to a house and garden elsewhere in London or on one of the new model estates in the suburbs, or even a seaside bungalow at one of the modest utopias built between the wars, like Jaywick on the Essex coast.

Against this historical backdrop, the radical character of Forshall and Abercrombie’s plan for reconstructing the East End is evident. Central to the plan was a new park at Mile End. Facilitated by the extensive bomb damage caused by the 1940-41 Blitz, the park was to occupy a thin strip of land a mile-and-a-quarter long and a quarter-mile wide beside the Regent’s Canal and would link Victoria Park with the Limehouse Basin and the Thames (see Figure 1). This strip was assigned Metropolitan Open Land planning status and was therefore protected as if it were green belt. But in the context of post-war austerity and housing shortages, building took precedence over landscaping, and the integrated vision of the 1943 County of London Plan was lost.

— Figure 1 here —

In the decades after the World War II, the East End changed dramatically as air quality improved, industry moved out, and the docks were closed. But planners’ pride and attention focused on tower blocks and complexes that aimed to provide “modern” homes at affordable rents. In the age of steel and concrete, mass car ownership, and top-down planning, little priority was given to complementary public gardens or greening urban spaces. This wasn’t just a matter of short-changing poorer neighborhoods. Even high-prestige projects like the South Bank arts complex were characterized by an unrelenting blanket of concrete. By the time public dislike of high modernist design and the social problems it generated became too obvious to ignore, Thatcherism was starting to take hold and local governments were under pressure to privatize rather than invest further in public goods. Assets such as prime-site buildings and open spaces were sold off—especially social housing, school playing fields, and public recreation grounds, which had decimating effects on youth services. In these unfavorable times, the London authorities and then Tower Hamlets neighborhood committees worked on some parts of the park at Mile End in the 1970s and 1980s. But it wasn’t treated as a single project, and some bomb-damaged sections remained largely untouched.

In the early 1990s, when I first became a regular visitor to Mile End after my youngest brother moved there to live, “drabness and dreariness” persisted. Instead of giving

pleasure and relief from the shabby streets with their awkward mix of Victorian terraces and post-war high-rise and low-rise blocks, the flat, scrubby common round the corner seemed emblematic of neglect. It felt dominated by noise and fumes from the heavy traffic passing along the Mile End Road and seemed mainly frequented by alcoholics and homeless people. In a neighborhood where most people lived in flats and virtually nobody had more than a small brick yard, there wasn't a single swing much less a children's playground. Victoria Park, a mile up the road, was still the nearest "proper park." Moreover, the contrast between the sad state of Mile End Park and the millions being invested in the shiny, new global finance enclave a mile down the road at Canary Wharf seemed to exemplify all too clearly the Thatcherite legacy and the end of the post-war project for a more equitable society.

"A Park for the 21st Century"

When Margaret Thatcher closed down the Greater London Council by an Act of Parliament in 1986, she left the capital without an elected body to shape strategic decisions and administer a range of London-wide services. She also ended an important mechanism of redistribution between constituent boroughs. Councils with socio-economically deprived populations, like Tower Hamlets in the East End, were further hit by budget capping and then the poll tax, which replaced the relatively progressive property-based local rates by a flat head-count levy. Demoralized by fiscal constraints and the rhetorical onslaught, they were left struggling to maintain basic services.

So it is not surprising that the initiative for reviving the 1943 plan for Mile End seems to have come from different quarters: the Environment Trust. This small, locally based, independent organization was set up in 1979 by the Department of the Environment to address the problem of urban blight and bomb-damaged wastelands in Tower Hamlets. However, lacking adequate funds or assets, its brief was soon scaled down. So although the Mile End Park was an obvious project, during the 1980s staff energy was dedicated to smaller projects such as rehabilitating allotments and neighborhood gardens. By the early 1990s, a twin commitment to social justice and environmental sustainability had become the Trust's driving ethos. This commitment to sustainability would add a further layer to Forshall and Abercrombie's vision. But the project to build "a park for the 21st century" only became a feasible when a new source of finance came into being.

On becoming Prime Minister in 1991, John Major faced the legacies of a decade of cuts in public investment. Yet despite visibly deteriorating civic infrastructure—and British entrepreneurs' failure to conform to neoliberal theory and invest in public works—Major was reluctant to modify the restructured tax regime. Instead he introduced a new mechanism, one that would both generate fresh revenues and further consolidate Thatcher's program by fostering a spirit of risk-taking and competitiveness. In 1993 he set up the National Lottery and a grant awarding body, the Millennium Commission. A large portion of initial takings was ring-fenced for the centerpiece of the approaching millennium celebrations, the Dome at Greenwich. The rest was to be distributed in smaller grants for arts, social, environmental and heritage projects.

When the Millennium Commission invited bids in 1995, the Environment Trust was well positioned. Having tried and failed to gain private sector funding, it had an outline proposal and was able to form an executive partnership with Tower Hamlets Borough Council and

the East London Partnership (a local business forum). In contrast to the tourist orientation of so many lottery projects, the bid was firmly local in focus. It aimed to reach the area's ethnically and socio-economically diverse population and had three core concepts:

- A different form, function and theme—art, sport, play, ecology and fun—for each section of the park;
- Community involvement in the design and implementation;
- The creation of a park that demonstrated new thinking about how a park could work and be built for sustainability.

Initial discussions with the Millennium Commission were favorable. But with no seed money available, it was Tower Hamlets that put up £40,000 to fund a community- planning weekend. Held at a local primary school in September 1995, it brought together project partners, 300 residents, and a professional design team led by George Gardiner of Tibbalds Monro and Piers Gough of CZWG Planners, Engineers and Cost Consultants.

A great deal of lip service has been paid to community planning and consultation over the last fifteen years. But, in this instance, it seems to have been the real thing, and the event did generate fresh ideas and shape key decisions. Contrary to media propaganda about public indifference, in the course of the weekend the commitment to innovation and sustainability were strengthened. So, for example, the “Fun Park with helter-skelter, ferris wheel and semi-permanent funfairs and circuses” was discarded—after a local resident pointed out “you can't have nineteenth century technology in a twenty-first century park.” Instead a set of bold landscape elements was agreed. The most ambitious was a green bridge over the Mile End Road. Others included an undulating central pathway and earth-sheltered buildings to respect the Metropolitan Open Land status. The meeting also agreed on a strategy to generate income for future maintenance: rents from shops and restaurants sited under the new bridge and a go-kart circuit. Six months later, the £12.5 million bid—matched by funds from other partners and supported by letters from local residents, schools, businesses, and others—was agreed by the Millennium Commission.

Achieving Coherence

At the most obvious level, the great achievement of the landscaping work carried out at Mile End between 1997 and 2000 is that it created a spacious park out of an irregular patchwork of open spaces. I am not a nervous person, but before the transformation, I always thought twice about walking through the southern part of the park. And although on one or two occasions I followed the canal path through the narrow tunnel under the Mile End Road to explore the area on the northern side, I did so with some trepidation. Neglected and abandoned urban spaces often have a haunting aesthetic allure, and the way plants move in to break up concrete and put down roots in the rubble of brick and cement ignoring litter and rubbish can be cause for wonder. But it was not a place I would have felt comfortable taking my young nephews. Now, like any well-designed and cared-for park, it feels safe and inviting—so we've often ended up wandering further than we'd intended.

At the center of the park is the landscape feature that has played the most dramatic role in overcoming the former fragmentation: the Green Bridge. It is an inspired structure,

which received an Institute of Civil Engineers Award in 2001. While the idea came from a local resident at the 1995 community-planning weekend, great credit is due to architect Piers Gough and the team of structural engineers who ran with it. The wonderful thing about the bridge is the way it is landscaped into the park and shields northern and southern stretches from the Mile End junction, blocking noise, fumes and visual ugliness. From inside the park, especially from the south side, you have the sense of walking up and over a small hill (see Plate 1). Only when you are underneath, going along, or crossing the road is it obviously a bridge (see Plate 2).

— Plates 1 and 2 here —

A less evident, but no less important, achievement than solving the problem of physical fragmentation is the creation of a coherent park from a diverse set of new centers and activity areas. A lot is packed into the 90 acres, as Figure 1 shows. This reflects both the stated determination to cater to a diverse range of ages, tastes and interests, and a desire to conserve and incorporate existing structures. It also represents a real design challenge, one further compounded by the awkward dimensions of the long, narrow, flat stretch of land. Given prevailing trends, it is not hard to imagine that the park could have ended up resembling a long, thin canal-fronted mall of activity zones or a sort of crowded theme park like the Eden Project in Cornwall. The fact that it didn't is a tribute to the landscape designers.

Park documents highlight the “undulating central pathway” as the main source of coherence. It certainly works well—leading you through the park, keeping you away from the road that runs north-south down the east side, and working in counterpoint with the straight towpath of the Regent's Canal along the west side. But there is also something else going on, something more subtle at work. This is the way principles agreed in the planning process have been affirmed in the layout and design. In abstract terms, these core principles translate as follows:

- Compliance with open land status + □ priority to integrity of landscape + buildings + structures landscaped *into* rather than erected *on* the park;
- Respect for diversity of taste □ pluralist approach + complementarity;
- Fun and enjoyment □ playfulness and visual surprise.

Put more concretely, these principles work together in the following way. In most instances, activity areas are landscaped into some sort of basin and separated from the next by a visual barrier—whether trees, embankments, or grassy hummocks. This physical separation is very important. It means different zones are not competing visually but stand instead in a relation of complementarity. As you walk, there is a sense that each feature is fully occupying its own place, and your attention is drawn to the here and now rather than being distracted by or drawn on to the next zone. At the same time, this layout generates a sense of playfulness. Visual surprise is at work in the Green Bridge's dual form and the way the earth-sheltered buildings appear as mounds from certain angles, only revealing their functional roles as Ecology, Arts and Children's Centers from others. Visual surprise and anticipation are also intrinsic to the experience of walking through the park: as you follow the path on or take one of the meandering side-paths, you can't help wondering what lies around the next bank of trees or over the next set of hummocks.

Biological Diversity

“London’s Parks and Gardens cover more than 25 percent of the capital—that’s more grass between toes than any other capital in Europe,” one recent guidebook proclaims. Yet, open space still remains unequally distributed between inner east and inner west and the outer areas. Moreover, fifteen years after the 1992 Earth Summit, the possibilities of using parks as prime sites for fostering biodiversity has still to be fully appreciated. Some parks are beginning to shift from the high chemical-input regimes that became standard in the 1950s to more ecologically benign regimes. But despite some media attention to organic gardening, the practical and aesthetic norms of what is best termed the “fast plant culture” are deeply engrained. Most people are still unaware of either the sterility created by chemical dependency or the potential carrying capacity of parks and gardens. And the enclave mentality that emerged with industrial capitalism to be reinforced by 20th-century high modernism still persists among many politicians and planners. As a result, recent biodiversity initiatives tend to be confined to urban nature reserves, such as the tidal bird sanctuary at Barnes in west London.

The integrated approach underpinning the Mile End Park cuts across this enclave thinking, exemplifying how green and brownfield sites can be transformed to serve both human and non-human populations. In doing so, it moves beyond the preservation ethic that has dominated policy approaches to biodiversity. Rather than preserve nature, the ethos was to invite nature back in—using artifice to construct a more varied and interesting landscape, creating habitats that would encourage colonization by native species of flora and fauna, and adopting ecologically favorable management practices.

In effect, the park project has secured a biological corridor between the Thames and Victoria Park at a time when metropolitan open land status is being eroded to make way for housing. Despite the disruption, re-landscaping has diversified and enhanced habitats within this corridor. The 40-foot breadth of the green bridge has broadened the connection between sections north and south of Mile End Rd. The landscaped mounds have increased the surface area, and three new ponds provide different types of freshwater habitat complementing the canal. There is also a greater density of trees now. Although few of the birches planted on the Green Bridge have survived, a number of native pines have, and elsewhere saplings planted to extend existing clusters and form new coppices seem to be thriving.

While commitment to fostering biodiversity is evident in the refusal to use chemical inputs, it is most visible in the small amount of space devoted to formal or ornamental flowerbeds and in the management of grass. There are flowering bulbs and shrubs on the terraced beds above the tiled pond at the southwest base of the Green Bridge and around the Arts Center. But among these are plenty of aromatic herbaceous shrubs such as lavender, which are attractive to bees and other insects; the border between the cycle and pedestrian lanes of the main path is mostly planted with beech. Instead of the formal rose-beds and carefully sequenced displays of flowering bulbs and annuals—the typical centerpieces of public parks in Britain—there are bulrushes, reeds, and other pond plants. Likewise, instead of close-cut turf, most areas of grass are left to grow long in the summer months. This facilitates wildflower colonization, completion of the annual seed cycle, and establishment of

meadows—with all the associated benefits for other species, especially birds, invertebrates, insects, and micro-organisms.

Six years after re-landscaping, the park is beginning to settle and mature. Colonization takes time, as do the delicate processes involved in creating rich webs of species interdependency. And as park director Michael Rowan stressed during our interview, enhancing habitats is an ongoing process, and there is still plenty of scope for further planting and experimentation. Recent initiatives include, for example, leaving log-piles for fungi, insects and beetles; putting up bat-boxes; and planting mixed hedges. Quantifying the impact of such initiatives and the project as a whole is difficult given that there was no prior audit. But there can be no doubt that favorable conditions for biodiversity to thrive have been established, and sightings of rare birds, flowers and spiders have already been reported.

Sustainability

If long-term predictions about climate change are accurate, parks and other green spaces will be very important in the future of cities, not just as “green lungs” contributing to good air quality—a function that has been stressed by different generations of philanthropists and planners in Britain since the Victorian period. They will also play an invaluable role as cooling sinks counterbalancing the heat-retentive qualities of brick, cement, and concrete. Simply securing green spaces in densely built urban neighborhoods through projects like the Mile End Park (which is now owned by a Charitable Trust) is therefore a contribution to the well-being of future generations—especially given the voracity of the current construction boom.

But in the case of the Mile End project, the commitment to sustainability was also explicitly linked to the everyday running of the park in terms of both energy/natural resource use and finances. The bid for Millennium lottery funding partly rested on this, and it is a real indictment of public policy in the U.K. that twelve years later, the park is one of just a handful of projects that have put sustainable principles into practice in a systematic way. In lottery projects, for example, although the financial aspects of sustainability are closely scrutinized, little priority has been given to the material aspects. They have been sidelined by treating the environment as a thematic category rather than as a core funding criterion. More generally, although building regulations have been tightened—and there are outstanding exceptions, such as the energy-efficient Welsh Parliament building—few organizations or projects have made the paradigm shift. Rather, dominant trends have been in the opposite direction: towards high energy reliance and built-in obsolescence—as in the extreme case of the £700 million Millennium Dome at Greenwich.

Putting sustainable principles into practice at the micro-level involves reducing external inputs, switching to renewable sources, and enhancing self-reliance in any given system. It also entails creating positive feedback mechanisms between the internal subsystems. Put in these abstract terms, this sounds complicated. In fact, if this logic guides planning and design, it is remarkably simple, as the Mile End project shows. Although achieving material sustainability is still work in process, the park runs with minimal reliance on outside sources of water and fertilizers. The Green Bridge has a rainwater collection/irrigation system; a 90-meter borehole supplies non-potable needs in the rest of the park and its buildings; and mulches from grass and other cuttings are used instead of

fossil-fuel fertilizers. The park's reliance on external energy is also low. The choice of earth-sheltered buildings, which have high energy efficiency, means the Arts, Ecology and Children's Centers are heated with just minor external boosts. Some park lamps have dual solar-wind generators, and water is pumped around the ponds by a wind turbine. Future plans include an anaerobic digester to process organic matter into methane, compost and liquid fertilizer priorities, and micro-generating systems for other buildings and centers—starting with a solar canopy for the Go Kart circuit, which will be installed shortly.

The park is also partially self-reliant in financial terms, thanks to the commercial assets incorporated into the original project. Although the planned endowment fund has yet to receive significant donations, about a third of basic running costs are met by rents from the commercial premises under the Green Bridge and from center premises in the park that are rented out to specialist service providers. The rest of the core funding is provided by Tower Hamlets in the form of a ring-fenced budget. Lower than anticipated levels of revenue mean that the park has fewer staff than envisaged: a director and four rangers. Despite this, the director expressed a remarkably positive “can do” approach during our interview and seems to have made the most of the financial and operational autonomy conferred by the unit's institutional location in the Borough's Department of Environment and Culture (rather than the Parks Department) to experiment with sustainable management practices. In fact, budget constraints may have actually strengthened the commitment to sustainability. As one park document put it: “mowing less frequently benefits biodiversity and reduces labor costs.”

While the pace of implementing the diverse elements of the original project may be slower than planned, there are some advantages to this in terms of holistic development and responsiveness. Making a virtue out of necessity, the director seems to have a very on-the-ground, hands-on role in the day-to-day running of the park, buying in specialist expertise when needed. The rangers also do a wide range of jobs from social events and play activities to gardening and general upkeep. So they have more personal contact with people using the park than might otherwise be the case, which has benefits in relation to handling conflicts and prioritizing needs. Likewise, the Arts, Ecology, Play and Security Forums set up in 2003 are not viewed simply as external or bureaucratic mechanisms of accountability but as having a core role in running the park. As the director put it: “We couldn't do without them”...“they are crucial for ensuring that the park does what local people want.” He also emphasized that members bring to the forums a wide range of specialist knowledge and are “an invaluable source of advice and expertise,” which reduces outlays on outreach and consultants.

Finally, the fact that the director controls the annual budget and is responsible for making it balance makes the use of discretionary sliding scales and cross-subsidies possible. Last year, for example, the park team ran gardening sessions with about 400 corporate volunteers (as team-building exercises). The £10 charge per head covered staff costs and also contributed to park upkeep. Such initiatives release funds and staff time for free public events like the annual dog show and the St. Barnabas Fair.

Ecological Pedagogy

If the Mile End Park demonstrates the feasibility of combining recreational facilities with habitats that foster biodiversity, it is also an invaluable educational resource for improving ecological literacy. This is crucial if we are to make a transition to a more sustainable society, given current levels of estrangement from ecological processes—as environmental scientists, such as David Orr and Jules Pretty, have stressed. In this regard, concern expressed in a recent park document that only people familiar with ecological principles will recognize their role in park design and management seems rather harsh. Recognition of how these principles have been put into practice may be a source of pleasure—as it was for me when I noticed the long grass in early summer, for example. But although some obvious goals are still to be achieved (such as explanatory signs around the park or public displays and opening times in the Ecology Center), this should not lead us to undervalue the existing pedagogical functions of the project.

Such functions are most obvious in the courses run three days a week by the Lea River Trust at the Ecology Center for local primary and secondary schools. Although ecological and environmental awareness has been part of the national curriculum for the last fifteen years or so, such awareness has seldom been complemented by messages from the built environment and everyday material practices outside the classroom. Courses in the park overcome this disjuncture, which is especially acute for kids growing up in the inner cities. These courses are also opportunities to actively experience different ecosystems and to observe ecological cycles across the seasons. As Orr emphasizes, such experiences in childhood are a crucial foundation for fostering ecological sensibilities and enthusiasm.

But the park's pedagogical functions go beyond formal education. The open planning process was almost certainly a catalyst for learning and reflection for many involved in consultation. And now that the park is up and running, participation in enhancing habitats is embedded in the program of events organized by park rangers. In the three months between late August and early November 2006, for example, five of the nine publicized events involved ecologically oriented activities (see Box 1). A further function is to show alternative technologies at work. The prominent wind- and solar-generated park lamps and the earth-sheltered buildings are likely to be the first many people have seen close-up in an everyday context.

— **Box 1 here** —

At a more subtle level, there is also considerable pedagogical value in exposing people to a different aesthetic. As James C. Scott stresses, one characteristic of the high modernism that permeated 20th-century planning is the aesthetic premium placed on tidy, geometrically ordered landscapes. This premium, reinforced by the fast plant industry, has played an important role in shaping expectations, sensibilities and taste. Conversely, as Pretty emphasizes, connecting people with landscapes grounded in sustainable principles—in this case aiming to foster native species—can generate alternative aesthetic norms and sensibilities. Exposure on a regular basis becomes a form of socialization, especially for children, who invariably enjoy learning to name the world around them and often develop deep affection for the familiar and routine.

It is important to note that park documents and publicity materials are characterized by an ethos of pragmatism and enjoyment and also perform an important pedagogical role.

Ecological rationales and the goal of working towards full sustainability are presented as common sense rather than earnest missions. Likewise, activities organized by park rangers are framed in terms of enjoyment rather than as moral imperatives linked to endangered species, ecological crisis, and climate change. The ethos is “come and have fun and try out something new and interesting,” rather than “do your bit for the planet,” “save our bats,” or “just two hours of your time can help our birds.” In this way, park discourses subvert the dominant framing of ecological projects as entailing sacrifice, virtue, and worthiness. Needless to say, this ethos of enjoyment has much wider appeal and is more likely to spark curiosity and motivate desire for further knowledge and involvement.

Social Justice

Urban projects like the Mile End Park which entail major investment in local amenities often generate a dynamic of gentrification that stymies original goals of improving social justice. Ten or fifteen years ago, the main incentives for anyone moving to Mile End were to be close to lectures at Queen Mary and Westfield College or the combination of relatively cheap rents and house prices, good transport links, and proximity to Docklands, the City, and central London. Mile End itself wasn't much more than a tube stop on the Central line and a road junction. The park project has changed this and made Mile End a much more attractive place to live.

This has certainly contributed to boosting the local property market. New blocks of flats and halls of residence for students at Queen Mary's have been built on the derelict land along the west bank of the canal. Bow Wharf has been restored and now houses a comedy club, restaurant, and shops. Estate agents have mushroomed, and house prices have increased. The value of my brother's small Victorian terraced house, for example, has jumped from £82,000 in 1990 to around £350,000, and neighbors in the same street have been quoted even higher prices. But it would be a mistake to portray this boom as solely an effect of the park. It is also due to wider ripple effects of the expansion of the City and global finance, house price inflation in the Southeast, and the success of London's bid to host the 2012 Olympics two miles away.

Despite this obvious boom and estate agents' hype, it seems unlikely that middle-class appropriation will spread further than the canal front and a small number of streets and squares. Beyond these, there are significant barriers to further gentrification, not least the proportion of low-quality high-rise blocks, middle-class fear of crime, and concerns about local secondary schools. The socio-economic profile is much more mixed than before, but most neighborhoods adjacent to the park are still quite poor. The park has cheered up rather than transformed the parade along the east side on Burdett Rd, for example. The shops are still small stores, about half run by Bangladeshi families; and although a couple of new cafes opened around the same time as the park, they are small, busy neighborhood eating places where you get a good meal for a fiver.

Wandering around the park at different times of the day, week and year, you come across a remarkable mix of people, suggesting that it really is serving residents from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, as intended. Images that linger from my own visits include Eddie, my brother's cheery neighbor, setting off for a walk with his Jack Russell dog; a small team of people with learning difficulties hoeing the terraced beds with a park ranger; groups

of Bangladeshi schoolgirls chatting beside the tiled pond at lunchtime; young and older lovers among the trees; families sitting around in the late afternoon sun; the Somalis who come out to play football around seven o'clock on summer evenings; cyclists and joggers passing by on their way somewhere else. There are exceptions of course. My own impression is that there are fewer older people than might be expected—and I can't help wondering whether they might miss the rosebeds and a colorful splash of annuals.

Public Space

Ten years ago the tube station was the most significant point of convergence for people living, working, or studying around Mile End. The park project has created, to use Hopwood and Mellor's term, a convivial alternative. At a time when dominant tendencies move in the opposite direction towards privatization, commercialization, social segregation and closure, it has created an attractive public space, a community focal point, and a stronger sense of place.

Scholars have recently debated how social capital generated by involvement in civic organizations contributes to individual well-being, social cohesion and the health of democracy. In Britain this idea has also been picked up by politicians, think-tanks, and policy-makers. They now regularly lament the decline of voluntary work and exhort us to get involved—wilfully ignoring the long-hours work culture that militates against this. Much less attention has been paid, however, to the significance of public spaces, understood in a physical and not just a metaphorical sense—with the notable exception of Richard Sennett whose study, *The Fall of Public Man*, seems even more relevant today than when it was first published 30 years ago.

In this context, the social contribution of the park project resides not just in the fact that it provides a set of activity zones where people of similar tastes and interests can meet, interact, or get involved in organizing; or that it is a space where existing informal groups can enjoy themselves; or even that annual events provide collective rituals that affirm community and place. The project's value also lies in its role as a place of impersonal sociality and a non-commercial alternative to the shopping mall or high street. It is a place where people from diverse backgrounds converge and experience random fleeting encounters, and maybe exchange a casual nod, smile, or the time of day with strangers.

As writers from Baudelaire, Simmel, and Benjamin onwards have observed, this random impersonal sociality is one reason why people have flocked to cities and experienced them as places of exhilaration and freedom. On a less exalted note, as Sennett stresses, routine, impersonal sociality with strangers can act as an emotional counterweight to personalized relations in the private or work spheres. Anyone who has felt cooped up indoors with small children will know the worth of a casual chat with other carers at the swings, just as anyone who has felt the weight of solitude or personal problems may know that the simple act of exchanging greetings with another walker can often shift mood and perspective. Yet as Sennett notes, such effects have become widely overlooked as a result of *longue durée* cultural shifts towards privileging personal and intimate relations of work and family as loci of individual satisfaction and well-being.

In an area like Mile End where there are some inter-ethnic tensions, most evident in assertive displays of the English flag outside certain pubs, routine impersonal encounters can also play a positive role in community relations. It is not that regulars of such pubs are likely to change their anti-immigrant or racist views by using the park. Rather, because the park is a relaxing place shared by people from different backgrounds and communities, it generates experiences of mutual recognition, trust, and reassurance, which counter experiences of hostility. Needless to say, such positive experiences affirm equality across social divisions and are the bedrock of social citizenship and democracy.

Conclusions

The Mile End Park is not smart or slick, and there is still plenty to do to fully realize the goal of sustainability. But it now feels like one park and in some places is already quite beautiful. At a time of neoliberal entrenchment, projects like this are important. They should not be reduced to expressions of identities or resistance—frameworks that have predominated since the 1990s. Rather, they deserve to be considered more carefully as concrete experiments in the “arts of the possible,” which are “good to think.” By giving material and spatial form to alternative sets of values and practices, they refute the claim that “there is no alternative,” keep alternative values socially salient, and foster alternative ways of being, doing, and imagining. These functions are invaluable given that most people under 40 have grown up being schooled in the norms and rules of neoliberal reasoning, and estrangement from ecological processes is widespread.

Exemplary projects are obviously no substitute for decisive political leadership at the national level and a systematic rethinking of public policy based on equitable and sustainable principles. Still, they may provide the groundwork for changing attitudes and demonstrating what is feasible. Indeed, as I conclude this essay, there are signs that certain sections of the establishment are starting to wake up to the political significance of such micro-level initiatives. It seems unlikely that New Labour’s policies will undergo substantial changes under the leadership of Gordon Brown. But, as Soper has pointed out, the Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats are beginning to realize that such projects express the desires of a potential electoral constituency. And, as scientific consensus and tangible changes in the weather make the gravity of climate change much more difficult to deny, there is some evidence that journalists and opposition politicians are starting to take such projects more seriously as sources of fresh ideas. These signs do not add up to a trend, much less a shift in policy approach. But they do suggest a greater openness to alternatives, and such openness is a necessary starting point for change.

Figures, Plates and Boxes

Figure 1: Map of Mile End Park

(Section from Mile End Park map 2006, courtesy of Culture and Environment Department, London Borough of Tower Hamlets; © Crown Copyright Ordnance Survey)

Plate 1: The Green Bridge from the South Park

Source: Jane Hindley

Plate 2: The Green Bridge from the Mile End Road

Source: Jane Hindley

Box 1: Mile End Park Events

Source: www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/data/parks/mile-end/events/cfm, 12/11/06.

Batbox making

Sunday, August 27th, 5pm-7pm

Celebrate European Bat Weekend and make bat boxes. An ideal bat residence is high up away from predators, dry and with enough room for up to thirty friends to stay over and keep the place nice and warm. You can take the bat box home or help us put it up in the park. Tools and materials provided.

Bat walk

Sunday, August 27th, 7:30-9:30pm

Ken Greenway will lead a walk with bat detectors so we can hear bats as they travel through the park hunting for their dinner (or is it their breakfast?)

Seed gathering and seed popping

Sunday, October 8th, 10am-12 noon

The tree council is encouraging people to gather acorns and other native tree seeds to ensure the regeneration of these trees. We will be planting up the seeds to be watched over by the park rangers who will plant them in the park when they are bigger. We will also be popping balloons filled with wildflower seeds. Why? The popping spreads the seeds over a large area so they have room to germinate and its lots of fun!

Feed the Birds

Sunday, October 29th, 10am-12 noon

As part of Feed the Bird's Day you can have a go at making your own bird feeder to hang in your garden and find out what to feed birds and what else you can do to help them survive the winter.

Wildflower Liberation

Sunday, November 12th, 10am-12 noon

Follow us on a tour of tiny neglected and abandoned green spaces in the borough and pop balloons filled with wild flowers seeds over them. In some areas the seeds won't survive or the areas may be concreted over, in others the seeds will germinate and passers-by next year will wonder where the flowers come from.

(Source: <http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/data/parks/mile-end/events/cfm>, accessed 12/11/06.)