



How cities use parks for...

Arts and Cultural Programs

Executive Summary

Urban parks have always been an important setting for arts and cultural programs. During the late 19th century, parks commonly hosted musical events. By the beginning of the 20th century, dance, theatre, and even the new medium of film began to be represented in parks programming.

Today, there is a tremendous flowering of artistic and cultural activity in urban parks, from large-scale performing arts festivals to long-term residencies with arts organizations. Parks and the arts have become mutually beneficial: the arts can play an essential role in revitalizing a park, and parks in turn can help solve problems faced by artists and arts organizations.

Since parks are the democratic spaces of a city, where communities can come together to express their identities, the marriage of parks and the arts makes perfect sense. Parks can be a vital place for the cultural expression of a community and a city.

Key Point #1

Cities today use parks for a wide range of artistic events and activities.

Key Point #2

Parks can provide a setting for in-depth and long-term partnerships between communities and artists.

Key Point #3

Arts activity can play an integral role in the revitalization of a park.

Key Point #4

Arts and cultural programs in parks can help arts organizations develop new audiences and can provide suitable rehearsal and performance space.

KEY POINT #1:

Cities today use parks for a wide range of artistic events and activities.

An early and popular use of urban parks was as a setting for parades, cultural celebrations, and, especially, musical events. In New York City, for example, as early as 1859, parks such as Mount Morris, Central, Hamilton Fish, and others across the city hosted concerts by military bands and popular ensembles of the day. Today, there are few large cities that do not sponsor outdoor music events, such as **Eugene, Oregon's** summer concerts that take place in Cuthbert Amphitheater.

While parks have always been a setting for monuments, the use of parks for sculpture and other outdoor installations also has a long history. The first organization created to support the placement of artwork in urban parks was **Philadelphia's** Fairmount Park Art Association, founded in 1872. In the late 1950s, again led by Philadelphia, cities created "Percent for Art" programs, which mandated that a certain percentage of the budget for capital projects had to be spent on public art, and much of that work found its way to parks and other public spaces. Today, private organizations such as **New York City's** Public Art Fund routinely plan and install temporary art installations in parks. In **Providence, Rhode Island**, WaterFire—a series of 100 bonfires that illuminate the three rivers and surrounding parks of the city, with musical accompaniment—visually transforms the downtown area on evenings throughout the summer.

As early as the 1920s, there are records of film being shown in parks. Today, technological advances have made the public exhibition of films in parks easy and cost-effective, giving cities the modern equivalent of the drive-in theater. One advantage of film programs is that they necessarily bring audiences into parks at night, when it might otherwise be difficult to create entertaining activity in the space. As part of its extensive film programming in parks, **Austin, Texas**, has created "Splash Party Movie Nights," where families can sit (or float!) in Deep Eddy Pool, while enjoying a family-oriented movie.

The technical requirements of theater and dance make outdoor presentation relatively more difficult, but there has nevertheless been an explosion of such activity in parks. In **New York City's** Central Park alone, there are dozens of alfresco Shakespeare performances every summer; from large and famous programs such as The Public Theater's Shakespeare in the Park to "Shakespeare on the Run," where the audience moves from place to place for each successive scene of the play. In **Rochester, New York**, the Rochester Museum & Science Center Players and the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery stage dramatic walking tours and plays in Mount Hope Cemetery, the municipal burial ground of such famous Americans as Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony. These programs help the city expand Mt. Hope's position to an important cultural and park resource as well as a cemetery. Cities such as **Boulder, Colorado**, and **Austin, Texas**, have strong dance programs, with lessons for kids and adults, as well as outdoor performance. A trend towards creating site-specific dance work for parks is also emerging.

Parks can also house museums and other institutions. One of the best models is Forest Park in **St. Louis**, which hosts five major institutions, including an art museum and a 10,000 seat amphitheater. While it is common for parks to have arts facilities, the concentration of so many in a single space has made Forest Park an important arts destination and has helped build a large and enthusiastic constituency for the park. In **Buffalo, New York**, the Olmsted Crescent similarly weaves together parks and cultural institutions. Recent efforts to collectively market the organizations, such as the Olmsted Crescent Cultural Pass, have been successful.

Lastly, parks—especially indoor recreation centers located within parks—provide an excellent location for arts education activities. Drumming instruction, painting classes, dance lessons, and other similar activities, especially for kids in an after-school setting, fill parks with structured activity. One of the cities with the highest ratio of recreation centers to residents is **Minneapolis, Minnesota**, with more than 50 community centers for its population of 360,000; the city fills its centers with hundreds of arts and cultural activities for kids, teens, adults, and seniors, year-round.

KEY POINT #2:

Parks can provide a setting for in-depth and long-term partnerships between communities and artists.

In **Baltimore**, the Gwynns Falls Trail, a seven-mile-long park for hiking, biking, and riding, has entered each year into a partnership with the Maryland Institute College of Art. The Maryland Institute curates a competition for Baltimore-region artists to create site-specific works for the first mile of the trail. During the two-week Art on the Trail exhibit, musical performances, children's activities, and walking tours create a festival atmosphere along the trail. Spectators are even encouraged to create their own environmental artwork, under the supervision of teaching artists.

Arts Corps is a nonprofit arts education program in **Seattle** with a simple and powerful concept: Seattle-area teaching artists are recruited to go into parks to provide free classes for kids. (While the program is citywide and takes place in a variety of locations, Arts Corps has a strong focus on community centers in parks.) Classes are offered in dance, drama, music, visual arts, and writing and last eight weeks. The program not only offers free and high quality instruction for kids, right in the neighborhoods where they live, but also creates long-term connections between artists and the parks. Approximately 1,500 kids are served each year by the program, and the demand far exceeds the current supply of teaching artists and classes.

KEY POINT #3:

Arts activity can play an integral role in the revitalization of a park.

One key to revitalizing a failing park is to create community involvement, and the arts provide an ideal tool. Arts activity can attract large numbers of people to a park, especially at night, when the space may have been previously considered foreboding and dangerous. The arts can also highlight the park's potential to be a vital community asset.

In the mid-1990s, **Reno, Nevada**, was feeling the adverse effects of a declining entertainment and gaming industry. The Truckee River, which flows through the city, linking together most of Reno's major cultural institutions, had lost its glamour and appeal. In response, city leaders created the Artown festival, a month-long celebration of the arts, to revitalize the downtown area, highlight local businesses and artists, and revitalize parks and public spaces. Today, more than 140,000 people attend Artown performances, most of which are free. One of the focal points of the festival is Wingfield Park, located on an island in the middle of the Truckee River, which has been enlivened by the arts events and now also serves as host to many other special events and activities.

Similarly, seven failing waterfront parks in **Queens, New York**, are being improved through arts activity. A recent report from the Center for an Urban Future highlighted the area as a neighborhood poised for economic development and noted that bringing existing cultural institutions together would greatly enhance the neighborhood. Through the "Living on the Edge" initiative produced by the nonprofit City Parks Foundation, film series, concerts, public art, and kids programs are connecting people and arts institutions to the parks and waterfront. Local merchants have been invited to sell their products to the audiences gathered for the arts events, thus spurring micro-economic activity. The neighborhood residents who attend these arts programs are becoming the core members of the community's park support groups.

In **Los Angeles**, ARTScorpsLA transforms abandoned lots into "arts parks," complete with environmental sculpture, holiday festivals and after-school programs. Through educational programs, kids get the opportunity to work alongside established artists, promoting community building and neighborhood pride. Three sites have already been improved through this effort.

KEY POINT #4:*Arts and cultural programs in parks can help arts organizations develop new audiences and can provide suitable rehearsal and performance space.*

Two of the most important challenges facing the arts are the need to develop new audiences and the lack of suitable rehearsal and performance space. Parks can help with both of these challenges.

A landmark 2002 study by Alaka Wali and Rebecca Severson highlighted the importance of the “informal arts”—including the presentation of arts activity in easily accessible and familiar spaces such as parks—in developing artists and audiences. Boundaries of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are more easily bridged in the informal arts than in established venues such as symphony halls, opera houses, and theaters. The study also found that the formal and informal arts have a deep and necessary interrelationship in developing artists and audiences of the future. Performances in parks can help artists reach new audiences and can also help audiences experience new or unfamiliar artists or art forms.

Arts organizations everywhere, but especially in cities, have difficulty finding space for rehearsal and performance. Parks can help. In **Chicago**, a program called Arts Partners in Residence systematically identified underused parks and parks spaces and then contracted with arts organizations looking for venues. Each organization agreed to provide performances and/or educational services in exchange for free space. The arrangement is strictly barter: no cash changes hands. The program has maximized the use of city-owned property, provided arts organizations with precious space, and fostered arts activity. One of the most successful partnerships is with Albany Park Theater Company, which helps kids create and produce their own theatrical productions. The program’s mentoring facet is so effective that the level of college attendance among neighborhood residents has increased, with many kids receiving theatrical scholarships.

Resources

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City Parks Forum Briefing Papers

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