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Giving parks the green light: how can we ensure green space is more accessible?

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Dr Meredith Whitten is an LSE Fellow in Environment in the Department of Geography and Environment at LSE. Her research focuses on the urban environment, particularly the intricate, evolving and often contested relationship between cities and nature, and how this is mediated through planning to address urban sustainability, including both human and ecological health.

Public parks were created to be healthy spaces at a time when cholera was running rife. More recently, they've become a lifeline to many during the coronavirus pandemic. But we need to be more creative in our approach if green spaces are to be made available to everyone, argues **Meredith Whitten**.

A place to meet with friends, to exercise, to eat lunch, to go on a date, to reflect. For many of us, parks and green spaces are essential to our physical and mental wellbeing, with the events of the last two years really highlighting their value.

But whose responsibility are they? Who are they for? And how can we ensure they are protected, managed and accessible to everyone in a city like London where land is at a premium?

"When I tell people I research parks and green spaces, they always say it must be such a fun topic - and it is - but it's also really complex and there are lots of difficult questions and issues to address," explains Dr Meredith Whitten.

An LSE Fellow in Environment in the Department of Geography and Environment at LSE, Dr Whitten's work focuses on landscape planning and how we can integrate green spaces into a wider urban infrastructure.

Motivated by her own love of nature and wildlife after growing up in the US and holidaying and working in the country's national parks and wilderness areas, Dr Whitten's work explores how we can make green spaces more accessible.



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A walk in the park

“In the UK, the Victorians left an incredible legacy with public parks that remains influential, but my research has shown this legacy can also limit contemporary green spaces. We see them as ornamental: a nice to have amenity rather than a critical resource,” she explains. She goes on to describe a park she visited recently as a place with “fences, within fences, within fences” and an abundance of signs forbidding walking on the grass, scooters and skateboarding.

The Victorians revered the countryside and romanticised about how it should look. And it was during this era that the first public parks were introduced, with Victoria Park, London’s first, opening in 1845.

“Public parks were designed to create physically healthy spaces while cholera was running rife in the city, but they were also created to address issues around morality and behaviour. For example, green spaces were designed for walking or promenading, which exposed the working class to the refined manners of the upper class. The Victorians hoped this behaviour would set an example and encourage better behaviour amongst the ‘amoral’ lower classes. Our parks are still very much set up for this more passive use,” explains Dr Whitten.




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How green spaces are designed and managed can have a detrimental effect on those who use parks or exclude some people from accessing the space, with studies showing that younger people and women can feel unwelcome.

Research by the RAND Corporation in the US has found [women tend to use parks less](#) and for shorter time periods than men, who frequent parks more often to play sport. Similar work undertaken by UK campaign group, Make Space for Girls, has also found [girls can feel excluded from parks](#) with facilities geared towards activities more typically associated with boys, such as football pitches and skate parks.

Indeed, Dr Whitten recalls a conversation with a councillor in a London borough who told her permission for yoga facilities (often more popular with women) in a local park had been turned down, while permission for a football pitch had been granted.



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Levelling the playing field: how to ensure we all have access to green spaces

With the pandemic highlighting the importance of green space for health and wellbeing, how can we get round this formal idea of parks as just an amenity, and ensure they are welcoming and available to everyone?

Dr Whitten believes we need to re-frame how we think about green space. “We need to think beyond parks as destinations, but rather green space as an essential part of everyday urban life for everyone. This involves integrating a broader spectrum of green elements throughout a city (known as ‘urban greening’) and recognising the contributions of less traditional green spaces such as roof gardens, parklets and tree canopies,” she says.

“Something like a roof garden may never replace a big Victorian park or sports pitch, but it can provide opportunities for interaction with nature, a space for quiet reflection and an environment for someone to sit and experience wildflowers and biodiversity. With cities being built more and more densely, thinking more broadly and creatively about green space provision is important for delivering the wide-ranging benefits green spaces can provide.”

In a recent [book chapter](#), “How Can Inequalities in Access to Green Space be Addressed in a Post- Pandemic World? Lessons from London,” Dr Whitten highlights how pre-pandemic London was already taking action to supplement parks and green spaces with urban greening and was using the planning system to do this in a more holistic way. For example, efforts are underway to work more collaboratively with private companies and developers to provide urban greening.

So with parks and green spaces providing so many benefits, perhaps it is time for us to look towards the future and more creative solutions, instead of relying too rigidly on the past. ■

Dr Meredith Whitten was speaking to Charlotte Kelloway, Media Relations Manager at LSE.

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