Rehnberg on Loughran, 'Parks for Profit: Selling Nature in the City'

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Nicky Rehnberg on Kevin Loughran, Parks for Profit: Selling Nature in the City

Urban parks tend to be seen as a net positive, providing benefits for the environment, community, and businesses. This is not always the case, as outlined in Parks for Profit: Selling Nature in the City. Kevin Loughran explores the creation of “postindustrial parks,” former sites of industry in urban cityscapes adaptively reused into green spaces in the twenty-first century. Loughran’s case studies—the Highline in New York, the Bloomingdale Trail/606 in Chicago, and Buffalo Bayou Park in Houston—successfully illustrate that these parks are part of a longer legacy, where “public” green spaces are not quite public and use “nature as a benign guise to soften master plans and control social space” (p. 157).

The slim but compelling book is organized into twelve chapters with two major sections. “Growth Machines in the Garden” and “Gardens in the Machine” are plays on Leo Marx’s Machine in the Garden (1964), reminding readers that US culture is still contending with the clashing ideals of pastoralism and industrialization in the twenty-first century. The tension between “the natural” and “the urban” has become much more complicated and physically apparent in postindustrial parks that must serve multiple purposes and financial bottom lines. In the first section, readers are given a historical review of each case study that delves into local policy, politics, and bureaucracy. This section concludes with a chapter that encapsulates the book’s main question: are parks for profit or for people?

The answer to this is parsed out in the second section. Loughran considers the “defectiveness” of these landscapes (e.g., Chicago’s flatness and Houston’s flooding); the “imbrication” of postindustrial parks, highlighting the overlap between “nature” and “the city” that visitors experience in such places; and the authenticity of such labels in view of projects like the Highline, the Bloomingdale Trail/606, and Buffalo Bayou Park. Ultimately, readers are given a more direct and satisfying answer in the chapter “Spatial Practices and Social Control.” While postindustrial parks are inspirational examples of adaptive reuse, they also power green gentrification by bringing in more business, making these spaces more exclusionary, programmatic, and consumerist. Through this, postindustrial parks become places, “where park users are expected to consume ... and to be suspicious of nonconsumers, because why else are they in the park—what are their intentions?” (p. 155).

Postindustrial parks have extra surveillance and policing, and they serve the public from the top...
down rather than the bottom up. What are we to do with these park panopticons? Loughran tells us in his final chapter: abolish private corporations overseeing these sites, decolonize the connections between race, capital, and aesthetics when considering nature, and let rails and other urban infrastructure rot as it settles into nature.

*Parks for Profit* is a necessary introduction to urban greenspaces and parks in the twenty-first century. Its organization could easily be parsed out in an undergraduate course or a graduate seminar. The work is so well researched and considered that one may wish that the book’s robust endnotes would have been brought into the text. Perhaps in the next edition.


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