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# Book Reviews

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Kevin Loughran 2022: *Parks for Profit: Selling Nature in the City*. New York: Columbia University Press.



*Parks for Profit* by Kevin Loughran is a compelling and excellently written study of how urban growth machines pursue park restoration less to serve local communities and more to spur economic growth that benefits private corporations and their political allies. The book takes up three cases in which urban growth machines refurbished post-industrial parks to remove unwanted people and appeal to a new class of upscale, typically white, urban dwellers and tourists: the High Line in New York City, the Bloomingdale Trail/606 in Chicago, and Buffalo Bayou Park in Houston. Central to these redevelopments was the reintroduction of ‘wild nature’ against the backdrop of rusted industrial ruins: an attempt to blend the urban and the natural that recalls the days when urban park designers fixated on the *picturesque*. Nonetheless, and despite the lofty

rhetoric offered by city leaders and private donors, the redevelopment and ‘greening’ of each park failed to achieve equitable outcomes, leaving local communities and their needs behind.

The first case the author examines is the High Line in New York City’s Manhattan. Loughran situates the park in an extensive historical context that traces the histories of deindustrialization, deliberate segregation, white flight, and the eventual gentrification that characterized nearby neighborhoods before the park was completed in 2009. In 1999, a local group called Friends of the High Line (which had close ties to New York’s upscale art world) formed to convert an abandoned rail line into a public park. They faced considerable opposition until mayor Michael Bloomberg embraced the project as something that could bring economic benefits to New York City, increase property values, and even help the city in its bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympics. Private donors lined up behind the project, including big names from the city’s fashion world, and soon the High Line became a major real estate opportunity. Speculative development followed, as did efforts to bring in the ‘right’ kind of people: the upscale, white creative classes, and tourists. In 2014, five million people visited the park to take photos of the skyline, sip coffee and wine, and consume its cultural and environmental amenities. The High Line became the standard for redeveloping post-industrial parks.

Seeing the ‘success’ of the High Line, Chicago’s political and economic elites aimed to redevelop their own post-industrial park and spur gentrification. Yet in contrast to New York, a genuinely grassroots movement—the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail—was already raising funds and building community support to convert an abandoned rail line into a public park. Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, who was up for re-election and was intensely interested in maintaining Chicago’s ‘world-class city’ status, targeted the project. Financial control was seized from the grassroots movement as Emmanuel courted donations from Chicago-based companies like Boeing and secured US \$50 million in federal funding.

As the redevelopment effort intensified in the run-up to the mayoral election, many residents now rightly perceived the park as an opportunity for more development aimed at inviting gentrifiers and tourists. Officials renamed the park ‘the 606,’ (a reference to its Chicago postal code) to the ire of the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail. When the park was completed, it was clear it would not achieve the same high level of cultural spectacle and glamour as the High Line, but to Chicago’s credit, the park included several bike lanes, whereas the High Line did not. However, as Loughran argues, and as locals concerned with displacement and rising property values made clear, the real purpose of the park’s redevelopment had little to do with providing for the community or combating climate change, and was instead intended to serve the city’s business and financial elites.

For his third study, Loughran examines the case of Buffalo Bayou Park in Houston, delving into the city’s long history of oil profits, Jim Crow, and lack of zoning regulations. Houston’s leaders wanted to combat the city’s extensive decentralization, encourage gentrification, and ‘whiten’ downtown, strategically turning to park redevelopment as a means for doing so. In contrast to the Highline and the Bloomingdale Trail/606, there was no local movement that emerged to redevelop the park. Rather, redevelopment was driven by city elites; most notably, the city’s wealthiest person and energy mogul, Rich Kinder, whose foundation donated millions to the project—with major strings attached including a new public tax. As in New York and Chicago, park designers fixated on recreating ‘wild nature’ in the urban space, aspiring to recreate a lost ‘natural’ landscape. What emerged, however, was a highly privatized park with questionable access. The park achieved its elite goals of stimulating new development and luring the beloved white creative class back to the inner city.

In developing each of his case-study narratives, Loughran draws attention to a common set of practices and ideologies that characterized them all. Most welcome of all, he draws considerable attention to the central role that white supremacy played at multiple scales of governance, not only in the decades of white flight and red-lining that characterized nearby neighborhoods, but also in the ongoing efforts to displace people of color and bring in upper-class whites. Additionally, emerging alongside the new parks are extensive networks of surveillance technologies to ensure the park’s new cultural consumers feel safe as they spend money at artisanal restaurants. The author highlights the ways that the parks were far from abandoned before their redevelopment, often serving as places of shelter for the unhoused or gathering spaces for adventurous youth. Likewise, he develops a detailed historical examination of how ideas about cities and nature have changed over time.

At the end of the book, Loughran offers some key insights for how we can think differently about urban parks, nature, and what it means to live in an equitable

community. In sum, *Parks for Profit* is a timely addition to urban studies, cultural studies and environmental studies that raises important questions about the complex and overlapping social forces driving the emergence of new parks and also the consequences of such developments for those left behind.

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