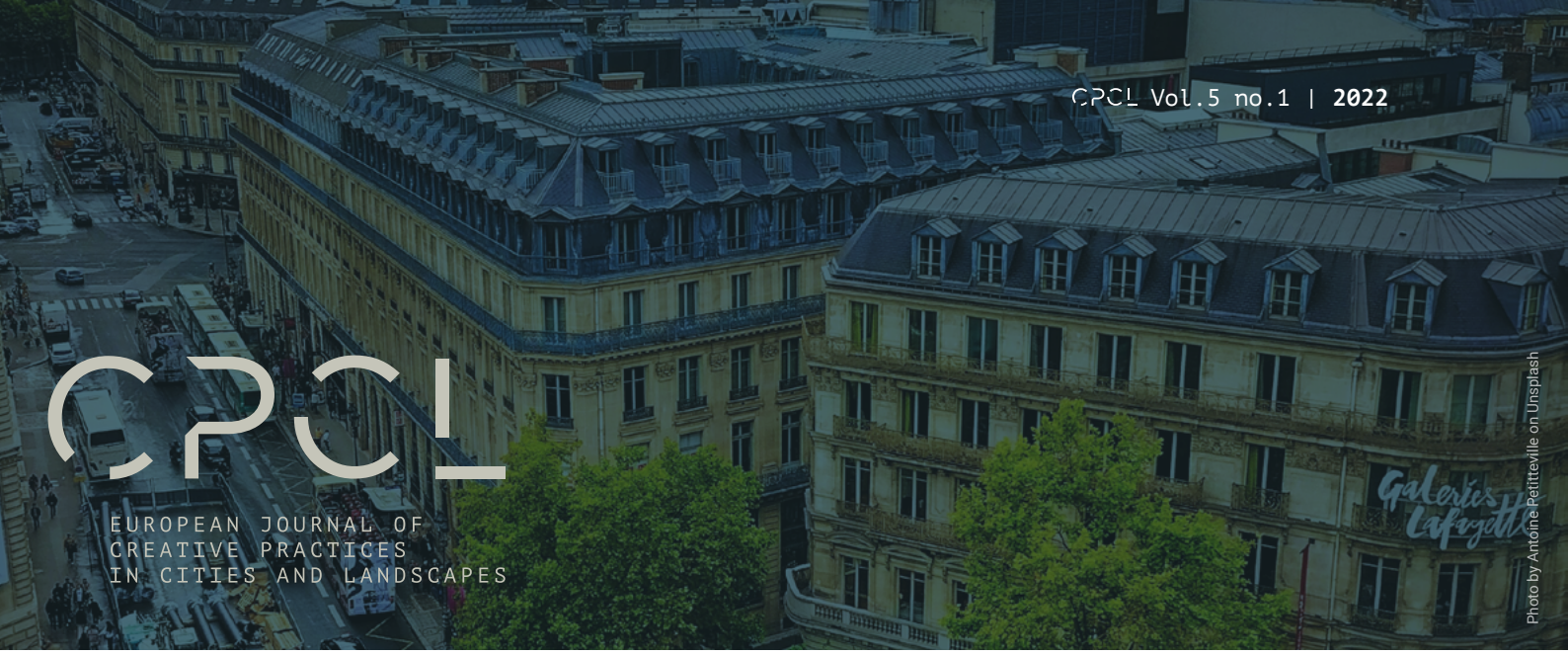
CPCL Vol.5 no.1 | 2022



MAIN SECTION

Almost Black Green. On the Nineteenth-Century Park and the Naturalization of Inequalities

Pierpaolo Ascari — University of Bologna
Contact: pierpaolo.ascari@unibo.it

ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, the projects of what Lewis Mumford called their "positive side" developed together with industrial cities: the large public park. The article aims to show how the inspiration, construction and functioning of these great engineering works also reveal a "dark side", understood as the use of the landscape and the spectacle of nature as a means of reproducing social inequalities.

KEYWORDS

Perception, Public Park, Anthropocene, Inequalities, Industrial city

PEER REVIEWED
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2612-0496/14749
ISSN 2612-0496
Copyright © 2022 Pierpaolo Ascari

CC BY 4.0

Perhaps the best way to understand how spaces act is to refer to the pandemic emergency, which for all of us also involved the elaboration of a remarkable perceptual experience. The experience of a domestic space bewitched by the possible latency of the contagion and the experience of the city transfigured by the lockdown. A deserted, silent, abandoned, almost suffering city. It is as if the virus had animated the walls and squares, allowing us to experience something comparable to the perceived space from the perspective of animistic cultures. Not for chamce, animism is an essential dimension of the feeling of the uncanny, according to Freud. Or even better: the virus has made a more ordinary dialectic, that of the interaction between bodies and an acting space, more intense and describable. My proposal is therefore to preserve the recent and dramatic impression of this dialectic in order to understand the action of other spaces in other contexts, on other bodies. Because not only the spaces animated by SARS-CoV-2 plot something, but also the no less global ones of the safe city, the postcard city and all the other declinations of the urban characterized by an overall transfer of social problems in the field of aesthetic-perceptive solutions.

The argument could be presented as a variation on the theme of the *aestheticization of politics*, as Walter Benjamin defined it, that is, of the recourse to the aesthetic sphere to elude consciences in the construction of consensus. Or, in the long term, one could go so far as to suspect that the deep roots of this trend are to be sought even in the Counter-Reformation and in the last sessions of the Council of Trent, when the church of Rome opposed iconoclasm by reiterating that the images would continue to hold their function of *Biblia pauperum*, to allow the revelation to bless even the poor in spirit. Not for nothing the most radical reasons for the perception of the divine were supported by the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Diego Laínez, according to whom two kinds of honors should be reserved for images: for what they represented (*relative adoration*) and for what they consisted materially, as an object of veneration and vehicle of "anathemas" in the same way as a consecrated robe (*objective adoration*)[1]. More recently, then, the relationship between perception and discipline will be given crucial importance in the development of Michel Foucault's reflection on the punitive city, where the penalty of the *Ancien Régime* will be replaced by "scenery, perspectives, optical effects, *trompe-l'œil*" which have the purpose of correcting behaviors through a specific figurative organization of the perceived space. Foucault writes: "At the crossroads, in the gardens, at the side of roads being repaired or bridges built, in workshops open to all, in the depths of mines that may be visited, will be hundreds of tiny theaters of punishment."[2] Punishments which therefore will have to operate in the same way as the anathemas

1 Paolo Sarpi, *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011), 1250-61.

2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 113.

inherent in the images of the Counter-Reformation, alongside the mimetic work of subjectivation that the Council of Trent had to favor by placing miracles and the example of the saints as a source of imitation before the eyes of the faithful, basis of a procedure that Foucault himself does not fail to define as "positive mechanics" of everyday life.[3]

The social positivity of nature

It is precisely the reference to such "mechanics" that is insistently mobilized by nineteenth-century designers to motivate the construction of large public parks. In an attempt to illustrate it, however, I will have to depart from how interpreting the appearance of the parks is a great city theorist like Lewis Mumford, according to whom their primary function would have been that "to provide for the masses of the city a brief equivalent of a visit to the countryside."[4] In this sense, says Mumford, "the designers recognized the need of the saving opposite within the city", drawing from the romanticism that continued to inspire the conception of nature in the context of industrialization a "positive side" (as Mumford always calls it). Without denying the existence of this positivity, therefore, the working hypothesis to which I would like to stick rather concerns its operation in the implementation of what could be defined as the corrective function or the *dark side* of public green. In other words, should we really consider the park as the *opposite extreme* of the industrial city?

Because even if we want to consider a paradigmatic case like that of the Buttes-Chaumont in Paris, for example, characterized precisely by the search for a profound discontinuity with respect to the metropolitan landscape that surrounds it, one would say that the presumed opposition between the public green and the chaotic development of the nineteenth-century city may miss something. To grasp this elusive element, it is perhaps worth noting how the creation of the Buttes-Chaumont represented only one piece of the more comprehensive transformation of Paris operated by Baron Haussmann during the Second Empire. From Marx and Engels to Benjamin himself, many have made explicit what was the class strategy that at the time had to animate the gutting of the old neighborhoods, both from a speculative point of view (with the creation of the first real estate credit), both from the point of view of the advantage that the *grands boulevards* would have ensured with respect to the narrow streets if it had been a question of repressing new riots. The baron himself, in his memoirs, does not fail to associate *the project d'embelissement* a properly military connotation.

3 Ibid., 112.

4 Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (San Diego, New York, London: HBJ Book, 1970), 218.

The Buttes-Chaumont will then be understood as an extension of the same strategy and a realization of the same offices in the perspective of the advantages that a specific engineering of nature could have brought to the governance of social tensions.[5]

In the first place, what at first glance would appear to be an uncontaminated portion of the city is in effect the product of a specific technological performance. All the waters are artificial, starting with the waterfall and the lake, with an increasingly massive use of infrastructures that towards the end of the century led the press of the time to define the park as a "museum of cement and concrete."[6] Nature is supported and staged by technological means, it is nature built for the purpose of enhancing the policies of space and perception that the Second Empire is resorting to counter the tendencies that had led to the revolutionary uprisings of 1848. One of the contrast media, then, consists precisely in the concealment of inequalities through the participation of all classes in the confrontation with the *artificially opposite* of nature and the strategy to which the park seems to obey, consequently, we would say that of connecting a disorientation of a social order to the geographical disorientation. The park must refer to the landscape of the mountains or the sea, the Alps or the Norman coast, but it is also a walk in geological time, a return to the origins of the earth and their frightening otherness compared to the corresponding appearance of all mankind (as in the abortive project of inserting the stone reproduction of some "antediluvian" creatures into the cave). The spaces designed and administered in this way, therefore, undoubtedly pursue the objective of beautifying a suburb or a neighborhood,[7] but as "machines to produce urbanity" that tend openly to the correction of less integrated subjects.[8]

Frederick Law Olmsted could provide us with a sort of story of origins in this sense when, in May 1851, he visited Birkenhead Park in Liverpool.[9] In front of the entrance to what he calls a "People's Garden" Olmsted says he came across a group of women to whom he seems to assign a constitutive role in the development of his *reportage*. The women go towards him shouting: "Will you take a cup of milk, sirs! Good, cool, sweet, cow's milk, gentlemen, or right warm from the ass", until the visitor manages to slip away through the Ionic colonnade that introduces him to a completely different world. A tree-lined, flowery world, full of adventurous paths that

---

5 Chiara Santini, "Construire le paysage de Paris. Alphand et ses équipes (1855-1891)," in *Le Grand Paris d'Alphand. Création et transmission d'un paysage urbain* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2018), 38.

6 Antoine Picon, "Nature et ingégnerie: le parc des Buttes-Chaumont," *Romantisme* 150 (2010): 35-49.

7 Françoise Hamon, "Les Buttes-Chaumont," in *Les Parcs et jardins dans l'urbanisme parisien XIX e - XX e siècle.* (Paris: Délégation à l'Action Artistique de la Ville de Paris, 2001), 99-100.

8 Picon, "Nature et ingégnerie," 47-48.

9 Frederick Law Olmsted, *Writings on Landscape, Culture, and Society* (New York: Library of America, 2015), 56-63.

flank a central pond, where the island was built amidst aquatic plants, goldfish and swans, and is accessed via a Chinese bridge. A world where "the contrivances to effect ventilation and cleanliness are very complete", above all, and where lower-ranking people enjoy the landscape together with gentlemen playing cricket or archery, because "the poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts, as the British Queen." Between a small temple and the orchestra for the marching bands, even "the wives of very humble laborers" can assume a demeanor that no longer has anything to do with the still warm milk of the ass, of which they emphasize the nunredeemed, incorrigible and plebeian nature. For the maximum satisfaction of "philanthropists and men of taste", certainly, but also of speculators and businessmen, because "the consequence of all these sorts of things is, that all about, the town lands, which a few years ago were almost worthless wastes, have become of priceless value." In short, the park's technology is one that Olmsted allows himself to summarize, six years before signing off on the Central Park project, in the guidebook he is leafing through in Liverpool, which says: "Here nature may be viewed in her loveliest garb, the most obdurate heart may be softened, and the mind gently led to pursuits which refine, purify, and alleviate the humblest of the toil-worn." And finally he quotes a certain Dr. Robertson, author of an 1847 book entitled *The Present Sanatory Condition of Birkenhead*, because together with political advantages, the people's garden seems to offer an important contribution to the fight against disease. In this respect the park corresponds to a strategy that can be defined both biological and moral[10] and which involves the transformation of the way in which public space is perceived and reproduced.[11] A space of which the synecdoche of the park is appointed to tame the uses, instilling in the consciousness of the lower classes an ideal of harmony and a corresponding intolerance to the conflict that the most spontaneous practices of the street (from strikes to petty crime) were making at the time increasingly desirable.[12]

Enclosures and contacts

These are the very first findings of a genealogy that should always be kept handy while we witness the simultaneous convergence of two factors. On the one hand, the debate on the so-called Anthropocene risks endorsing a conception of nature similar to that designed and then made operational by the engineers of the nineteenth-century parks, delegated to the aesthetic-perceptive government of inequalities and to the deactivation of conflict. In a book that is useful in many ways, Gianfranco Pellegrino

10 Brett Williams, "The Paradox of Parks". *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 13 (2006): 158.

11 David J. Madden, "Revisiting the End of Public Space: Assembling the Public in an Urban Park," *City & Community* 9 (2010): 200.

12 Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, "Central Park against the streets: the enclosure of public space cultures in mid-nineteenth century New York," *Social & Cultural Geography* 15 (2014): 152.

and Marcello di Paola recently wrote: "Engaging in urban gardens is less striking than promoting an event, but it can have much more lasting political and symbolic consequences".[13] It seems clear to me: there is still something of these urban gardens that inherits the function of alternative to conflict (or its more traditional forms) that was entrusted to the parks of Baron Haussmann and Olmsted. On the other hand, the same function could take on a further and more overall relevance in light of the processes that continue to transform our cities into an articulated series of *theme parks*: extending the corrective model of Birkenhead Park to all spaces that can be translated into a setting more in line with tourist consumption, shopping, cultural festivals, Bohemianism, food and wine or what Jane Jacobs already defined the fetish of public green.[14] As the late Mark Fisher has repeatedly argued, these are processes that define the systematic retreat of neoliberalism to the economic and social solutions of the nineteenth century as modern or dutifully in step with the times. The theming of the city, writes Michael Sorkin, claims to be accredited as a "great scenes of the civic, visible and accessible", where the theme park acts as a model for the overall production of "the place that embodies it all, the ageographia [the disorientation to which I referred earlier], the surveillance and control, the simulations without end. [A space that] presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure - all those artfully hoodwinking forms - as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work".[15] And if it really had been about learning from Las Vegas, conceiving the entire urban landscape as a *decorated shed*, that is to say a dimension in which all the "systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program",[16] we could consider ourselves satisfied. Except that the program in question remains that of the governmental function to which the park seems destined from the beginning (the ancient Franconian *parrik* which remains in the Latin *parricus* and in the German *pferch* means precisely "fence") and which is now being extended to the city entirely included in the disciplinary perspective of *new urban enclosures*.[17]

These enclosures always maintain a vital relationship with the ownership dimension of spaces, both when they are invoked as a solution to all the problems that should be attributed to the existence of excessively

---

13 Gianfranco Pellegrino and Marcello di Paola, *Nell'Antropocene. Etica e politica alla fine del mondo* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2018), 227.

14 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961). 90.

15 Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a theme park: the new American city and the end of public space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), XV.

16 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT Press, 1972), 87.

17 Stuart Hodkinson, "The new urban enclosures," *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 16 (2012): 500-518.

common spaces,[18] and when they are conceptualized as an extension of the predatory morphology that has always accompanied the so-called original accumulation of capital.[19] In the prehistory of the first case, the citizens of Atlanta will be mentioned who at the time of desegregation reacted to the presence of blacks in public parks with the request to transfer the municipal lands into the hands of private investors. White citizens of the working class, of course, who would not have benefited in the least from privatizations but who, through the identification of any public policy with a provision for the benefit of African Americans, favored them at every level and by every means, even resorting to the fiscal revolt.[20] In the second case, it will be appropriate to quote Mike Davis when he notes that "Latin American immigrants and their children [...] exult in playgrounds, parks, squares, libraries and other endangered species of US public space, and thus form one of the most important constituencies for the preservation of our urban commons."[21]

Mary Louise Pratt defined it as a "contact zone", this kind of corresponding joint "to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths."[22] But the contact area is also one in which stories and lifestyles force the status of citizenship (p. 39) into "a productive space, not only reflective, where new possibilities and misunderstanding are generated at the same time. and understanding."[23] And to return to the point, therefore, also the contemporary city in which the green economy and the less protected sections of the population are damned, despite being hit by a violent division into fences or precisely in relation to the attempt to symbolically saturate its conformation and atmospheres, is articulated in a more comprehensive system of continuously marked and disputed spaces, areas of contact between the urban environment as a "growth machine", the consensus that these machines are able to generate and the not necessarily formal resistance of the bodies that remain entangled.[24]

---

18 Shin Lee and Chris Webster, "Enclosure of the urban commons," *GeoJournal* 66, (2006): 27-42; Michael Hebbert, "Re-Enclosure of the Urban Picturesque: Green-Space Transformations in Postmodern Urbanism," *The Town Planning Review* 79 (2008): 31-59.

19 Tom Mels, "Primitive Accumulation and the Production of Abstract Space: Nineteenth-century Mire Reclamation on Gotland," *Antipode* 46, (2014): 1113-1133; Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, "Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons," *Antipode* 47, (2015): 999-1020.

20 Kevin M. Kruse, "The Politics of Race and Public Space. Desegregation, Privatization, and the Tax Revolt in Atlanta," *Journal of Urban History* 31, (2005): 610-633.

21 Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism. Latinos Reinvent the Us City* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 55.

22 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 34.

23 Antonio Di Campli, *Abitare la differenza. Il turista e il migrante* (Roma: Donzelli, 2019), 84.

24 Harvey Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place." *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1976): 309-332.

Conclusion

In this way, Sevilla-Buitrago himself poses the fundamental problem of the conflict between the new enclosures and the body-perceptive sphere, while not daring to propose a solution, who writes: "No doubt, the body is a crucial battlefield of capitalism, both an accumulation strategy and a space for the production of social order and subjectivity. It is the object of a series of dispossessions throughout history, intensified recently in a wide range of bodily forms of alienation and commodification: from labor to affect power, from the corporeal image and reproductive capacities to sex and sexuality, organs and the genome. These and many other bodily aspects and functions are regulated, exploited, sold or trafficked, often violently, either on a state-enshrined or illegal basis. However, it remains unclear in what sense these procedures can be regarded as cases of enclosure."[25]

It remains unclear, therefore, but already the same model of the nineteenth-century park, by making a disciplinary enclosure correspond to a perimeter of wrought iron, while not resulting in a confiscation of the bodies, it selects the perceptions and expressions. The enclosure, in other words, does not exclusively call into question the most brutal processes of dispossession, but can also be determined at the level of the *perceptual canons* that inform and structure another common, that of bodies in connection with each other, namely the modulation field of *the nature that we are*. Intervening on the perceived environment therefore means manipulating this modulation: this would seem to be the contact area in which the milk sellers whom Olmsted met at the entrance to the first public park in history continue to cause scandal and produce tension.

25 Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, "Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons," *Antipode* 47 (2015): 16.

Pierpaolo Ascari teaches Aesthetics at the Department of Architecture, University of Bologna. He received his master's degree in philosophy at the University of Bologna, and his Ph.D. at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa. He is author of *Ebola e le forme* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2017), *Attraverso i confini. Lettura, storia ed esperienza estetica in Stendhal e Flaubert* (Milan: Mimesis, 2018), *Corpi e recinti. Estetica ed economia politica del decoro* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2019) and *The Adventure of Form: Aesthetics, Nature and Society* (Delft: BK Books, 2021). He was a fellow at the Alsos Foundation in Bologna for the research program "Migrations and migrants in Italy" and he edited the volume *Oggetti contesi. Le cose nella migrazione* (Milan: Mimesis 2020).

References

Davis, Mike. *Magical Urbanism. Latinos Reinvent the Us City*. London: New York: Verso, 2000.

Di Campli, Antonio. *Abitare la differenza. Il turista e il migrante*. Rome: Donzelli, 2019.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Hamon, Françoise. "Les Buttes-Chaumont," in *Les Parcs et jardins dans l'urbanisme parisien XIX e - XX e siècle*. Paris: Délégation à l'Action Artistique de la Ville de Paris, 2001.

Hebbert, Michael. "Re-Enclosure of the Urban Picturesque: Green-Space Transformations in Postmodern Urbanism". *The Town Planning Review* 79, no. 1 (2008): 31-59.

Hodkinson, Stuart. "The new urban enclosures". *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 16, no. 16 (2012): 500-518.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961.

Kruse, Kevin M. "The Politics of Race and Public Space. Desegregation, Privatization, and the Tax Revolt in Atlanta". *Journal of Urban History* 31, no. 5 (2005): 610-633.

Lee, Shin, and Webster, Chris. "Enclosure of the urban commons". *GeoJournal* 66, no. 1/2 (2006): 27-42.

Madden, David J. "Revisiting the End of Public Space: Assembling the Public in an Urban Park". *City & Community* 9, no. 2 (2010): 187-207.

Mels, Tom. "Primitive Accumulation and the Production of Abstract Space: Nineteenth-century Mire Reclamation on Gotland". *Antipode* 46, no. 4 (2014): 1113-1133.

Molotch, Harvey. "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place". *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (1976): 309-332.

Mumford, Lewis. *The Culture of Cities*. San Diego, New York, London: HBJ Book, 1970.

Olmsted, Frederick Law. *Writings on Landscape, Culture, and Society*. New York: Library of America, 2015.

Pellegrino, Gianfranco, and di Paola, Marcello. *Nell'Antropocene. Etica e politica alla fine del mondo*. Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2018.

Picon, Antoine. "Nature et ingégnerie: le parc des Buttes-Chaumont". *Romantisme* 150, no. 4 (2010): 35-49.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone". *Profession* (1991): 33-44.

Santini, Chiara. "Construire le paysage de Paris. Alphand et ses équipes (1855-1891)," in *Le Grand Paris d'Alphand. Création et transmission d'un paysage urbain*, actes du colloque international organisé par l'ENSA La Villette et l'ENSP Versailles à la Mairie de Paris du 27 au 29 November 2017. Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2018.

Sarpi, Paolo. *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino.* Turino: Einaudi, 2011.

Sevilla-Buitrago, Alvaro. "Central Park against the streets: the enclosure of public space cultures in mid-nineteenth century New York". *Social & Cultural Geography* 15, no. 2 (2014): 151-171.

Sevilla-Buitrago, Alvaro. "Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons". *Antipode* 47, no. 4 (2015): 999-1020.

Sorkin, Michael. *Variations on a theme park: the new American city and the end of public space*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.

Venturi, Robert, Scott Brown, Denise, and Izenour, Steven. *Learning from Las Vegas: The forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT Press, 1972

Williams, Brett. "The Paradox of Parks". *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 13 (2006): 139-171.