



Front cover of *Community Green: Rediscovering the Enclosed Spaces of the Garden Suburb Tradition* (with permission from Robert Freestone, 2024).



Neighbourhood open space in suburban liveability

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Community Green: Rediscovering the Enclosed Spaces of the Garden Suburb Tradition, David Nichols and Robert Freestone. Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2024, ISBN: 978-0-36746-245-1 (softcover).

This encyclopaedic work by Nichols and Freestone is the result of extensive thinking, international review and research over several years. As the succinct preface page indicates, neighbourhood open space ranks highly as a key component in suburban liveability assessments. In this context, the book connects the past, present and future of planning specifically for small internal open spaces. It resuscitates the enclosed, almost secretive reserve from history as a distinctive form of local open space whose problems and potentialities are relevant to many other green community spaces. This then opens up wider connections between localism and globalism, the past and the future, and connects to broader global challenges of cohesion, health, food and climate change.

Community Green: Rediscovering the Enclosed Spaces of the Garden Suburb Tradition is an extensively illustrated book with an international coverage – including examples of open space that tell human stories of civic initiatives, struggles and triumphs. A strong point is its human focus, and not least those who live with small internal open spaces in residential settings. In this way the book extends beyond a physical urban planning textbook based on the theme that towns and cities are places for people.

The book is both timely and welcome. A major reason for this hinges on the political and governmental reviews and action taking place in cities and towns worldwide to combat urban sprawl by increasing densities, even though the book does not address this phenomenon. As urban areas densify, green spaces integral to the layouts will be needed not only for their value as breathing spaces but also as spaces that are attractive to and for people and for urban wildlife.¹ Examples from the past as outlined in the book, while addressing mainly suburban settings, provide valuable lessons for those contemplating the introduction of new developments in existing residential areas. It is certainly of benefit to any planning proposals to increase densities in existing lower- or medium-density urban settings.

Allied, indeed central, to this consideration is how and why we should be projecting to politicians and planners that people's sense of place in urban areas does not depend on architecture and buildings alone. Fortuitously we are also currently seeing the publication of scholarly and professional papers on the critical importance of green spaces in cities. Flowing from this, an important task is now getting this notion fixed in the minds of politicians and government planning agencies.

The introduction to *Community Green* (pp 1–15) convincingly sets out the logic of the book and its purposes, given that enclosed green spaces deliberately provided by planners have an extensive and usually a strong validity and a legacy, with some in use for over a century. In my mind, this prompts the question of whether the past is indeed a foreign country where people did things differently. The book's central focus is on making a case for a re-evaluation of internal reserves as a distinctive form of local open space that delivers social benefits. This is stated unambiguously on page 2, so that readers should bear in mind that:

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KEY WORDS

book review; community green; neighbourhood open space, suburban liveability

Citation: Taylor, K. (2024) Neighbourhood open space in suburban liveability. *Landscape Review*, 20(2), pp 68–71.

Received: 27 July 2024

Published: 26 November 2024

¹ On the topic of urban wildlife, see recent comment from Croeser and Kirk (2024).

Our history-based argument for the significance, retention and replication of that form examines the ways it has been propagated, misused and misunderstood over many decades and across numerous cities and nations ... The book can be read as historical study of the promotion, diffusion, hybridisation, reinvention, and misunderstanding of an innovative idea. It can also be considered as making a case for local city governments and neighbourhoods to heed history when seeking to understand the potential and environmental values of such features.

With this focus, the book logically adopts a historical overview study of community greens to establish a robust test of what does and does not work in their construction, use and governance. Coincidentally the authors do recognise that the character and features of the internal reserve are shared with street-frontage parks, courtyards and variations on the village green. They also state that the book is primarily an excursion into medium- and low-density planned suburbia. Nevertheless, as mentioned above it seems to me that the book also contains lessons for those proposing and constructing increased-density developments in cities as the urban housing crisis mounts – in particular, the importance of appreciating that internal reserves serve a purpose, whether it be active or visual, rather than being just leftover bits of land.

Here I am reminded of a time many years ago in the United Kingdom when, as a young town planner with a developing interest in landscape architecture and landscape planning, I attended a talk on open space use and design. The presenter thought-provokingly suggested there are two main types of urban open space – doing spaces and seeing spaces – and that seeing spaces can be just as valuable as doing spaces. Many of the myriad of examples of internal reserves in *Community Green* are combined doing and seeing spaces such as Greenwood Common in Berkeley, California, USA (pp 156–157). Such spaces avoid being experienced as leftover, soulless places.

As a guide to reading the book, the authors set out four key elements of a genuine internal reserve.

1. **It should be enclosed by residential properties.** The open space forming the reserve is surrounded on all sides predominantly by buildings. In this way, it can be considered a ‘backyard extension to a suburban home’, which is a concept dating back over 100 years. One example shown is a 1921 garden suburb design for Goulburn in New South Wales, Australia, which comes from John Sulman’s influential *An Introduction to the Study of Town Planning in Australia* and shows open access to the reserve (p 109).
2. **It should be at the rear of properties.** Here the authors stress ‘rear’ means precisely that. The familiar original Radburn layout (New Jersey, USA) – which separates pedestrians and vehicles and treats internal spaces as large internal parks in a superblock where houses have two fronts (one to the street, one to the park) – does not, according to Nichols and Freestone, provide examples of internal reserves.
3. **It should be accessible to all.** Most internal reserves adjoin residences, but may also be available to residents in the surrounding neighbourhood (and visitors).
4. **Its functions can (and probably should) periodically change.** Changes will occur as demographics change over time. For example, a children’s play area may morph into a low-key active recreation or community garden as children grow older and move from the area, leaving older residents as the majority.

In the introduction, the authors explain the terms ‘Garden Cities’ and ‘garden suburbs’ (pp 7–10) and their relationship with internal reserves. The early town planning movement co-opted both as examples of fit-for-purpose, local open space. Whilst the media and non-experts tend to use the two terms interchangeably, Nichols and Freestone point out that they are not interchangeable.

The garden suburb as a setting for house-and-garden living pre-dates the garden city concept. Ebenezer Howard introduced the concept of the garden city in the late 1890s publication *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. He advocated for self-contained new cities set away from older industrial cities to provide healthy living conditions for residents. An early example showcasing best practice of a garden city in the United Kingdom is Letchworth Garden City, designed by Unwin and Parker in 1903.

The earlier concept of the garden suburb emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Interestingly, garden suburbs were anathema to Howard because ‘they only ameliorated the horrors of industrial, slum-ridden London’ rather than eclipsing it with separate new towns (p 10). It was not surprising that it was also anathema to Unwin and Parker, who designed Hampstead Garden Suburb in England. The suburb consisted of just over 5,000 properties and was home to around 16,000 people. Undivided houses with individual gardens were a key feature. It included 11 interior spaces, some of which were tennis courts, but the majority were allotment gardens (p 43).

Forest Hills Gardens is one of the best-known American examples of early 20th century planned suburbia (p 46). According to the authors, ‘the New York Times described it as one of the few American contributions to the “industrial” and “garden” suburbs promoting equality between classes’ (p 47). Notably the renowned designer Frederick Olmstead (New York Central Park) was involved, seeing a number of potential uses for the spaces such as for tennis courts, passive recreation, children’s play areas and gardens.

The first five chapters of the book are organised chronologically, dealing with the periods 1890–1915, the 1920s, 1930–1960, the 1960s and 1970s, and 1980 to the present day, before the final chapter provides an overview. The text is the outcome of over two decades of progress, thought, research and discussion. It reflects a prodigious effort on behalf of the authors and gives a fascinating look into how the idea of the internal reserve has quietly but steadily developed. *Community Green* is replete with examples and the rollcall of famous names and places in the lexicography of planning history, both practical and theoretical. I recall many years ago a senior academic colleague suggested that when one wants to know in which direction to head, it is a good idea to understand fully where one started. This book certainly fulfils that adage.

REFERENCE

Croeser, T.; Kirk, G. (2024) Stepping stones for wildlife: how linking isolated habitats can help nature thrive in our cities. *The Conversation*, 20 July. Accessed 17 October 2024, <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-stones-wildlife-linking-isolated-habitats.html>