

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9831-9842>

Konrad Miciukiewicz

Institute of Global Prosperity  
The Bartlett – UCL Faculty of the Built Environment  
University College London  
e-mail: [konrad.miciukiewicz@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:konrad.miciukiewicz@ucl.ac.uk)

## CAN A PARK SAVE THE CITY?: HOPES AND PITFALLS OF THE LONDON NATIONAL PARK CITY

**Abstract:** This article enquires into the transformative potential of the London National Park City. In doing so it situates the vision for, the becoming, and the Charter of an urban national park in relational thinking about metropolitan nature and sustainable urbanisation. It looks at hopes and pitfalls of the London National Park City in the face of growing socio-environmental injustice and the climate crisis. First, the article explores the National Park City as a form of ecological reflexivity and social practice in the context of relational concepts of nature and the city. Second, it examines opportunities offered by the Park City with respect to urban environmental sustainability, health and wellbeing, connected diversity, socio-economic inclusion and political agency. Third, it looks at pitfalls of the National Park City relating to environmental gentrification, as well as to trade-offs between grassroots creativity and capability to bring about material change. Last but not least, the article advocates for negotiation of synergies between ‘green’ and ‘grey’ urban natures as a strategy to address the climate crisis.

**Keywords:** city, nature, London, National Park, relational geography, sustainable urbanisation, socio-environmental justice

“Let’s make a National Park City that is rich with nature and where everyone benefits from exploring, playing and learning outdoors. A city where we all enjoy high quality public and green spaces, where the air is clean to breathe and it’s a pleasure to swim in its waters. Together we can make London a greener, healthier, wilder, fairer and more harmonious places to live. Why not? [...]”

We are working together for better:

- lives, health and wellbeing
- wildlife, trees and flowers
- places, habitats, air, water, sea and land

- time outdoors, culture, art, playing, walking, cycling and eating
- locally grown food and responsible consumption
- decisions, sharing, learning and working together
- relationships with nature and with each other

This Charter confirms that we collectively share the ambition, responsibility and power to deliver these things and more.”

(Charter of the London National Park City, 22 July 2019)

## Introduction

Green and blue and open spaces already occupy 60% of the UK’s capital. Greater London is home to 8.5 million people, who speak over 300 languages, and 13,000 species of wildlife. Its forests, parks, allotments, farms, private gardens, warehouse rooftops and railway lines are complex assemblages of human and non-human life. The metropolitan nature – from robins in back gardens, through foxes roaming the streets at night, to exotic spiders crawling around Heathrow and scorpions living in hot tunnels of Victoria Line – is a key constituent of the socio-natural-technical ecosystem of the post-imperial London.

In July 2019 thousands of Londoners celebrated the green and blue open spaces at the National Park City Festival. Green rooftops, swimming competitions, kayaks on the Thames, photographic exhibitions and family games in urban forests electrified urbanites for more than a week. One of the highlights of the Festival took place at the City Hall. Sadiq Khan, London’s mayor, was joined by 150 NGOs, businesses and collectives in signing the Charter of the London National Park City.

The Charter formally proclaimed London a National Park City. But what does this actually mean in practice? Will the city be transformed into a network of green and blue spaces? Will new regulations be imposed to assure that? Will the London National Park City be – like Yellowstone National Park – patrolled by park rangers? Well, yes and no, a bit of it all. The Charter of the London National Park City is a statement of fact rather than a promise of a radical transformation. It establishes a myriad of partnerships between businesses, government agencies and local communities rather than a formal national park institution. It is built on aspirations, not regulations. What is the meaning of the Charter then? Can it save London’s nature? Can it make Londoners happier? Will it help to prevent the climate disaster or, maybe, will it – just as a plethora of local and national declarations of climate emergency – become a yet another political simulacrum?

In addressing these questions, first, the article explores the National Park City as a form of ecological reflexivity and social practice in the context of relational concepts of nature and the city. Second, it examines opportunities offered by the Park City with respect to urban environmental sustainability, health and wellbeing, connected diversity, socio-economic inclusion and political agency. Third, it looks at pitfalls of the National Park City relating to environmental gentrification, as well

as to trade-offs between grassroots creativity and capability to bring about material change. Last but not least, the article advocates for negotiation of synergies between ‘green’ and ‘grey’ urban natures as a strategy to address the climate crisis.

## 1. Nature and the city

The London National Park City translates relational concepts of nature and the city into everyday ecological reflexivity and socio-spatial practice. It helps to conceptualise, experience and transform the city as an integrated human-natural-technological assemblage.

Green and blue spaces have been key aesthetic, cultural and political achievements and expressions of urbanisation for centuries. Natural habitats in the city have always been transformed, adapted and ‘built’ in line with cultural, political, social imaginations and desires that, themselves, have been spatially and temporally entangled. Metropolitan parks, such as Tokyo’s Ueno with its blossoming cherry trees and Shinto shrines, New York’s Central Park with its myriad of waterways, outdoor music venues and the Met, or São Paulo’s Ibirapuera which hosts hundreds of different tree species and Oscar Niemeyer’s modernist architecture complex, have become signatures of these global cities and key spaces of identification for their residents.

However, the post-Enlightenment thought entrenched the separation of nature from society. This ‘Othering’ of nature (Latour 1994) established a double antithesis of nature and the city. First, nature was portrayed as pristine, harmonious, eternal and intrinsically good. Second, it was considered wild, uncivilised, dark and dangerous. On the one hand, parks, forests and waterways were seen as spaces of refuge from a brutal and chaotic urbanisation. On the other, rats, insects and viruses were seen as a domain of natural metabolism that was intrinsically hostile to humans. Paradoxically, even symbiotic urban-natural forms conceptualised in social science, policy and grassroots domains, such as eco-cities, were rooted in a peculiarly anti-urban sentiment and tended to reinforce antithetical thinking about the city and the natural environment. In this vein, environmental movements for long rejected the urban (the artificial and the harmful for the natural world) to embrace an idealised and romanticised interpretation of the natural order (the local, the self-sufficient, and the self-contained).

In the last 30 years human geography and spatial planning have contested the traditional ‘essentialist’, ‘Euclidean’ way of seeing space, offering a relational view that stresses connections/relations between diverse meanings, identities, actions and places (see: Healey 2004; Madanipour 2010). The Euclidean notion of absolute space, understood by Descartes as *res extensa*, which had earlier served the traditional spatial planning approaches to shape cities as unitary, integrated material objects (Graham, Healey 1998: 624), has been surpassed by the relational notion drawing from Leibniz’s theory of space. While ecological processes, by their very nature,

transgress contained territorial systems, this departure from the understanding of space as a territorial whole – a container filled with social, economic and political functions – towards the understanding of space as a socio-natural whole has been key to the rethinking of relations between nature and the city. Rather than as independent voids, the relational approaches conceptualise nature and the city as a time contingent and inter-scalar ‘urbanised ecosystems’ (see: Gandy 2003; Swyngedouw 2004; Castro, Heller 2009) shaped by both symbiotic and conflictual relations. The Charter of London National Park City brings this thinking about the city as a social-technical-natural assemblage to the collective consciousness, everyday spatial practices of urbanites and aspirations of the Local Government.

## 2. Hopes and opportunities

The new environmental challenges which the 21<sup>st</sup>-century cities are faced with require not only new technical and administrative solutions. Foremost, they call for a new ecological reflexivity and new emancipatory urban politics. The London National Park City offers a unique opportunity for bringing the natural capital together with institutional reflexivity and creativity of local communities to rethink and reshape the relationships between people, cities and nature. Turning London into a national park brings about five distinct hopes and opportunities.

### 2.1. Urban environmental sustainability

The London National Park City offers a potential locale for peaceful co-existence and interaction between people with fauna, flora and other forms of life in a dynamic non-equilibrium urban ecosystem. The partnership between policy and practice communities can enable both conservation of existing natural heritage and proactive approaches to biodiversity that will mobilise the creation of new intensive built/natural systems of metropolitan nature (see: Gandy 2003; Swyngedouw 1996 and 2006). While its grassroots provenance predisposes the London National Park City to shape nature-oriented daily forms of social practice, its support among policy makers makes it capable of influencing infrastructure provision. Potential synergies between the demand-side and supply-side interventions can embrace not only an increasing need for and delivery of ‘green’ and ‘blue’ recreational environments, but also sustainable forms of mobility and transportation, and energy- and resource-efficient forms of consumer goods production and circulation (Shove 2014; Shove, Walker 2014). This, in turn, can be a crucial contribution of the National Park City to the delivery of London’s ambitious decarbonisation targets. Within this the Park can be understood here as a bottom-linked platform (see: Garcia et al. 2009; Swyngedouw, Moulaert 2010; Andersson et al. 2013) for mutual learning and co-production

of sustainable urban landscapes where novel ways of exploring and knowing shape behavioural change and infrastructure provision.

## 2.2. Health and wellbeing

The changes that the London National Park City can potentially bring about to demand-side and supply-side interventions will include the provision and increased use of new green infrastructures, promotion of active forms of travel and reduced exposure of Londoners to air, water and soil pollutants, and climate change impacts. While clinical evidence suggests that impact assessment of both green space use and sustainable lifestyles requires complex multi-variable analyses where direct relations are difficult to measure, numerous studies imply health benefits of physical activity on both physical and mental health (see: Lovell et al. 2014; White et al. 2013; Lee, Maheswaran 2010; Takano et al. 2002; Coombes et al. 2010; Bell et al. 2008). Hence, it is expected that initiatives pursued and supported by the National Park City – if undertaken in conjunction with NHS interventions – can help in addressing obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and mental health impacts of social isolation, amongst others.

## 2.3. Connected diversity

The London National Park City offers an opportunity for connecting individuals, groups, communities and organisations through co-production of space, affirmative action and cross-cultural learning. The Park's connected diversity agenda involves bringing different people, species and places together and, by doing so, shaping new socio-natural assemblages. While public parks where different forms of co-presence and casual interaction take place are signatures of peaceful multicultural societies (see: Low et al. 2005; Wolch 2007; Sadler et al. 2010; Kaźmierczak 2013; Van den Broeck et al. 2013), everyday encounter between strangers in public space rarely results in forms of meaningful contact and connection (Valentine 2008; Amin 2002). The London National Park City offers a chance to take the agenda of connected diversity forward by supporting people from different walks of life to collectively design, materially produce, manage and own new forms of metropolitan nature.

In a time when increasing cultural heterogeneity is often construed as a problem and met with hegemonic discourses of controlled multiculturalism (Dukes, Musterd 2012; Miciukiewicz et al. 2012), new green 'contact zones' (Askins, Pain 2011) and 'spaces of inter-dependence' (Amin 2002), such as urban farms or community gardens, provide a unique opportunity for instigating forms of focused and sustained interaction. It can create a space for rethinking and redoing togetherness from below. On the one hand, the public desire for green and healthy environments constitutes one of the enclaves of unproblematically shared values. On the other, multi-vocal

horticultural knowledges and skills evade established professional hierarchies that characterise the domain of capitalist production (i.e. intensive farming). The National Park City can champion spaces where differences between class and ethnic cultures are not only visible and celebrated but also horizontally integrated into new circuits of economic production. As such the Park has a potential not only to bring about higher levels of bonding and bridging capital in a place, but also to rethink the ways in which social cohesion is conceptualised and actioned upon.

## 2.4. Socio-economic inclusion

The London National Park City can support and scale up creative and productive micro-practices that turn London into a more sustainable and prosperous city. For the National Park City to succeed, symbolic ownership of place(s) among different communities needs to be matched with variegated forms of economic ownership. This means creation of a plural economy that can address challenges of socio-spatial deprivation and environmental (in)justice through: (i) democratisation of access to land, knowledge, skills, employment, affordable goods and services and (ii) enabling economic activity across socio-economic strata and urban territory. The National Park City offers a chance to transform London into a Continuous Productive Urban Landscape (CPUL) (Bohn, Viljoen 2005) where networks of multi-functional urban infrastructures connect the modern urban capitalist economy to novel economic formations, such as ecosystem service economy, shared economy and circular economy. Operational objectives of the Park include, for example, supporting local affordable food produce, distributing this food to local schools, and bringing local agricultural production and distribution chains together with training and employment schemes for young people (see: Tornaghi 2014). However, the London National Park City's socio-economic inclusion agenda needs to go beyond securing equal access to 'new green economies' for different groups in the socio-economic strata.

## 2.5. Political agency

The London National Park City can play a strategic role in embedding the above-mentioned aims within London's governance networks. In doing so it should voice claims of communities on the ground and provide leverage to the initiatives they pursue. In particular, the partnership can bring together individual experts, organisations, authorities and businesses with legal, planning and environmental expertise to offer support to: (i) proactive initiatives of local groups who elaborate Neighbourhood Plans or wish to acquire and manage environmental assets and, (ii) initiatives of local communities and groups of interest who wish to exercise their right to dissent against unfavourable forms of urban development. Hence, the London National Park City offers an opportunity to embed the principles of 'recognitional justice' and

‘justice of capabilities’ (see: Fraser 1995; Nussbaum 2000; Dean 2009; Schlossberg 2007; Cook, Swyngedouw 2012) in the existing governance frameworks. The Park can play a facilitative and supportive role for its members, clients and communities in need. More broadly, the National Park City - as a forum for dialogue, innovation and mediation – can enhance the capability of particular communities and the city as a whole to agonise over main values and pathways to achieve them (Mouffe 2000a and 2000b; Hillier 2003). It offers an opportunity to ‘expose, propose and politicise’ (Marcuse 2009) the opportunities and challenges of the New Localism. By doing so it can help mayors, councils and citizens to think differently about their cities.

### 3. Pitfalls and challenges

In his fascinating book about the production of metropolitan nature in New York City entitled *Concrete and Clay* Matthew Gandy explores the reworking of nature as “a collective project that applies the human imagination to the transformation of urban space and affirms the interdependencies that sustain a flourishing civic realm” (Gandy 2003: 5). However, the collective project of producing Central Park, which brought elements of utopian socialism together with elements of American nationalism, writes Gandy, was somewhat contradictory from its very outset. While it intended to create a public realm for interaction with strangers, in practice it expanded the sphere of bourgeois individualism. It was a by-product and has become one of the key expressions of speculation on the real estate market.

Similar processes can haunt not only iconic inner city green(ed) spaces, such as the more recently reworked New York’s Highline, but also mundane neighbourhood parks and playgrounds in residential districts (Rigolon, Nemeth 2020). Paradoxically, in real estate capital-driven cities, such as New York or London in particular, attending to environmental justice problems of deprived neighbourhoods may lead to environmental gentrification, whereby populations that were meant to benefit from green space improvements face displacement and further exclusion (Byrne 2012; Checker 2011; Dooling 2009; Heynen, Perkins 2005; Wolch et al. 2014).

The history of construction and regeneration of parks is also a history of real estate boom, rising rents and evictions of those who cannot afford on living in the upgraded environments. By the same token organic grocery stores with local produce are both indicators and drivers of social and racial cleansing in the city. That risk also applies to both material and immaterial initiatives of the London National Park City.

### 4. Ways forward

First, the London National Park City should work towards securing the right to the city for those communities who live in the neighbourhoods designated for material interventions that improve the quality of green infrastructures and develop new

ecosystem services. National Park City's proponents, friends and supporters should be acutely aware of externalities that the National Park City can – purposely or accidentally – cause. They should also have both the will and the capability to counteract these adverse processes. Hence, the London National Park City should endeavour to prompt broad discussions of how real estate capital can best permeate through the city not only securing green and healthy environments in different socio-spatial locales, but also delivering new housing stock and creating employment opportunities. Amongst others, such debates may bring questions of greening together with questions of urban density to negotiate solutions whereby intensification of natural qualities of existing green spaces and greening of built/infrastructural environments could be coupled with release of land (e.g. low quality greenbelt areas) for genuinely 'affordable' housing.

Second, the coming years are likely to require negotiation between ideas and desires projected onto the London National Park City by advocates of the Park as a grassroots initiative with ambitions of those who see it as a community-public-private partnership. While the earlier are rightfully concerned about dangers of privatisation and further neoliberalisation of London's open spaces, the latter consider isolated grassroots initiatives as incapable of supporting physical regeneration of green and blue natural assets that have suffered from decades of Local Government defunding and systemic neglect.

Third, a harmonious vision of the London National Park City as a space of love, play and green entertainment clashes with a vision of the National Park City as social movement calling for change, as a more pragmatic social platform for development of green Local Neighbourhood Plans, or as a protest movement focusing on opposing unfavourable transformations in the city. The festive and playful vision for the London National Park City does not carry a sufficient critical potential and desire for a more radical social and spatial change. Settling on enjoyment of green spaces in the city, would say some, can detract attention from the climate emergency.

Fourth and linked to the previous points, the London National Park City will have to actively negotiate and navigate synergies between 'green' and 'grey' urban natures (Wachsmuth, Angelo 2018). While these two urban natures – the 'green urban nature' of parks, forests, meadows and organic food markets and the 'grey urban nature' signified by mass transit systems, passive buildings and geoengineering – are often, and for good reasons, contrasted with one another, they can mutually reinforce each other. From the ontological standpoint, say relational theorists in urban geography and spatial planning, they form – not without tensions – one social-natural-technical urban assemblage. More importantly, from the practical perspective, addressing the climate crisis will depend on achieving a wholesale redesign of urban economies that requires a careful navigation of synergies between community-romanticised green nature and techno-corporate grey nature.

## Conclusions

The complex processes of imagining, designing and making the London National Park City can serve both as an empirical context for theorising the new ecological reflexivity and as a driver of new emancipatory urban-ecological politics. This paper has explored how the National Park City epitomizes not only the socio-natural-technical complexity of urban metabolism, but also the ways in which the deeply uneven and conflictual nature of this metabolism is mediated through ecological reflexivity and practice. In doing so it examined the potentials of the Park in the face of growing socio-environmental injustice and the climate crisis, as well as challenges and trade-offs that face it. Subsequently the paper offered a few ways forward to go about addressing these challenges.

In the face of the climate emergency the London National Park City and similar initiatives in other cities can become platforms for reimagining, experiencing and experimenting with what a ‘city’ and what a ‘national park’ are, and what they can become. While we already have most important facts about climate change, we still need a to build a collective conviction to act on these facts. Urban national parks carry a potential to become living laboratories enabling us to feel the emotions that will instil this conviction.

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