Creating a Green City - Provision of Green Spaces in London, 1930-1990

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London has usually been perceived as a green city, but only a little attention has so far been paid to the provision of various kinds of green spaces in Inner London especially during the post-war period. Their provision has yet remained an important agenda in London planning. Hence, in my submission, I analyze how various authorities have provided green spaces within the city focusing on the areas of the contemporary boroughs of Camden and Southwark.

I will show first that both the London County Council (LCC) and the Greater London Council (GLC) succeeded in providing London with new permanent green spaces between the 1930s and the 1970s. Even the acreage open to the public in the Royal Parks increased due to the Cabinet policy to dissolve enclosures in them. Following the gradual implementation of town planning and the idea to centralize planning authority for re-development of London, the LCC was empowered as the principal planning authority for its administrative area under the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947. The most crucial new power was the authorization of the LCC to acquire any site designated as a green space by a compulsory purchase order. However, these orders required confirmation by the government illustrating the fact that Parliament could control London planning. The Metropolitan boroughs nonetheless continued to acquire small temporary green spaces within their areas for use of local residents. Yet the County of London Plan (1943) and the subsequent Administrative County of London Plan (1951) have influenced the provision of green spaces within London even in the late 1980s.

Although the new London borough councils became principal planning authorities for their administrative areas as the GLC replaced the LCC in 1965, the era during which regional authorities were the key actors for the provision of municipal green spaces ended in 1986, when the GLC was abolished. Therefore, the period from the late 1940s to the late 1970s illustrates the concentration of power for the green space provision beyond the local administration to regional level as both the LCC and even the GLC could execute their plans despite local opposition. The construction of new municipal green spaces in the Inner London was characterized by piecemeal acquisition of sites within built-up areas divided over long periods of time in an evolving societal context. The new green spaces were also designed for certain user groups like e.g. children, elders, or even environmentalists demonstrating the difference between 19th and 20th century municipal green spaces. Succeeding governments have nevertheless remained influential on London politics their activity changing from indirect in the 1930s to more direct one in the 1980s featuring e.g. restrictions on public spending. In addition, the role of non-governmental organizations in financing, carrying out required restoration works, and even providing new specialized green spaces has increased since the 1970s. This evolution of power illustrates that the provision of green spaces has again become dispersed between actors from local, regional and even national levels.

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