

## CHAPTER 10

# Event Takeover? The Commercialisation of London's Parks

Andrew Smith

### Introduction

Over the past forty years, public parks have had to endure periods of underfunding which have instigated inefficient cycles of decline and regeneration (Smith et al. 2014). These 'crises' are significant for various reasons, not least because they are usually accompanied by changes in the way parks are conceived, managed and governed. As Krisinsky and Simonet (2012) argue, park crises such as the one experienced in the US in the 1970s tend to be used as an excuse to justify further private sector involvement. They are an intrinsic part of the neoliberalisation project which is known to function through processes of creative destruction (Brenner and Theodore 2002). The austerity policies pursued by the UK government since 2010 mean many UK parks are currently experiencing the latest funding crisis. Local authorities have had to cope with significant cuts, with park budgets hit particularly hard: 92 per cent of UK park managers reported reductions in their budgets in 2013–2015 with 33 per cent experiencing cuts of over 20 per cent in the same period (Heritage Lottery Fund 2016).

---

#### How to cite this book chapter:

Smith, A. 2019. Event Takeover? The Commercialisation of London's Parks. In: Smith, A. and Graham, A. (eds.) *Destination London: The Expansion of the Visitor Economy*. Pp. 205–223. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book35.j>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND

The financial crisis currently facing parks provides the context for this chapter which explores the implications of the push for new sources of revenue. Parks have long earned revenue from concessions and charges, but many are now required to generate a substantial proportion of their funding via commercial income streams. This is changing the way parks are funded, but it is also transforming the ways they are governed and managed. Government austerity combined with the ongoing project to neoliberalise public services is creating a new breed of 'entrepreneurial parks' (Davidson 2013) which are 'financially self-sustaining' (Loughran 2014), an ambition which is assisted 'by having parks managed and maintained by private companies' (Davidson 2013: 657). In London, this trend is one that is strongly resisted both by local users (e.g. Park Friends groups) and by campaign groups (e.g. The Open Spaces Society) seeking to protect public access to open spaces.

The crisis facing UK parks, and the commercialisation likely to result from it, are national challenges rather than ones specific to London. But these issues are particularly relevant to the UK capital. London is a city famed for its parks, and as the permanent and temporary populations of the city have grown, these spaces are heavily used as sites for everyday recreation and tourist visitation. However, London's parks are not merely places for people to use and visit, they are highly symbolic sites that are coveted by various political and commercial interests. These multiple roles are often incompatible. The commercial exploitation of London's parks interferes with everyday use by restricting access to space and by encouraging certain types of user. Commercialisation also affects the established role of prominent green spaces like Hyde Park, Jubilee Gardens and Blackheath as sites of political gatherings and resistance. The analysis here highlights that London's parks are inherently contested spaces because the territorial demands of citizenry, capital and state collide.

This chapter examines the ways that London's parks are increasingly commercialised and it explores the various issues associated with this trend. These include a number of ideological concerns alongside problems with the efficacy of commercial funding. The paper then focuses on one of the most obvious and prevalent ways that London's park authorities are generating income – by staging commercial events. Events provide insightful examples of the way that public parks are being privatised in subtle and incremental ways. Hiring out parks to organisers of festivals, exhibitions and sports events provides a way of generating income from park space without having to sell off public assets. Indeed, the rise of park events illustrates how London's public spaces are increasingly offered for hire to private companies, something that erodes their public status. Commercial events involve temporary incursions, but their temporal footprint extends well beyond the duration of events and, combined with the potential for events to act as precedents for other further commercialisation, this means the rise of event funding has significant implications for the accessibility of parks.

The chapter begins with an overview of park commercialisation which is used to contextualise the subsequent discussion about London's parks' exploitation as event venues. In several instances, the introduction of commercial events into London's parks has been strongly resisted by local users. These disputes came to a head in 2016 when campaign groups launched legal actions against large-scale events in Battersea Park and Finsbury Park. These cases are discussed here alongside other insightful examples where local authorities have prioritised events as a way to help pay for parks. The paper is based on a series of research exercises undertaken in the summer of 2016 including interviews with park stakeholders, extensive observation exercises before, during and after events, and online communication with park users.

### **The Neoliberalisation and Commercialisation of Parks**

The commercialisation of parks can only be understood in the wider context of neoliberalisation of urban space. Within the enormous amount of published work on this theme, there are several texts that specifically examine neoliberal transformations of parks. For example, Krinsky and Simonet (2011) discuss the changes to staffing arrangements in New York City's parks, highlighting the increased use of non-unionised staff working for private contractors. In the contemporary era, staffing costs are also reduced by using volunteer labour – a noted characteristic of parks governed by neoliberal regimes (Rosol, 2010). Other texts focus on the transfer of responsibility from public to private organisations. For example, using Harvey's (1989) conceptualisation, Perkins (2009; 2616) examines how 'cash strapped and/or fiscally conservative local governments unload them in what amounts to a shift from state managerialism to entrepreneurial regimes of governance'. New management arrangements take various forms, including not for profits, social enterprises, private trusts, private companies, and various versions of Business Improvement Districts. Parks have always generated money from concessions, but in some neoliberal regimes, companies are not only invited to operate in parks, but to manage them as well. Perkins (2009) examines the ways some US parks have been leased to coffee chains who assume responsibility for maintenance.

Whilst many of the initiatives discussed above aim to address funding shortfalls by reducing maintenance costs, neoliberalism is also associated with various efforts to generate more income from parks. Work by Zukin (1995) and Madden (2010) in New York City shows how Bryant Park pioneered the introduction of commerce 'into what was previously the non-commercial domain of the municipal parks' (Madden 2010, 188). Loughran (2014) analyses how this has been accomplished in New York's newest park – the High Line – through the way that the space is structured and controlled – with commerce and consumption prioritised in the design and regulation of the park. This case – regarded

by Loughran (2014, 50) as 'an archetypal urban park of the neoliberal era' – also provides an illustrative example of the way parks are increasingly justified, created and maintained via the value they add to surrounding real estate (Millington 2015).

Attempts to generate more commercial revenue from parks take various forms. One option is to attract sponsorship/advertising, with companies purchasing the right to be associated with whole parks or specific features within them. In extreme cases this has involved selling the naming rights to parks. A second option is to lease space to commercial enterprises, with park authorities earning income through ground rent and/or a levy on ticket sales. This model encompasses both semi-permanent installations (e.g. visitor attractions) and temporary ones (e.g. events). For example, several London parks (Alexandra Palace Park, Trent Park and Battersea Park) now feature Go Ape attractions which require entry fees to access installations installed above ground in the trees (see Chapter 6). Park authorities can also generate income directly via introducing/raising charges for certain services (e.g. educational courses), permits (e.g. for commercial photography) and licenses (e.g. for fitness training). Parks have also attempted to increase the scope of charges levied for sport facilities by introducing fees for those wishing to play organised sport. For example, Regents Park in London now charges people who want to play football or cricket in areas designated for organised sport.

The sorts of commercial activities outlined above can generate a significant amount of revenue, particularly for iconic parks located in large cities. The Royal Parks – the agency responsible for eight historic parks in London – have pioneered the shift towards commercial funding. This was a transition they were required to make to offset reductions in their annual government grants. In 2015/6, the cost of managing the Royal Parks was £34.9 million and 64 per cent of these funds were raised via commercial income – through a mixture of events, sponsorship, donations, catering, grants, lottery funding, licences, and rental income from lodges, filming and photography (The Royal Parks 2016). A shift towards more commercial funding has been controversial and some of the new initiatives have been vehemently opposed. For example, in 2014 campaigners forced The Royal Parks to drop their plans to charge people who regularly played softball in Hyde Park.

Park commercialisation in the UK has been pushed by several quasi non-governmental organisations (QUANGOs) that, in the absence of national government involvement in parks, have assumed key leadership roles. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) – established in 1996 to distribute money generated through the UK National Lottery – has become particularly influential given they are one of the few organisations with the resources to fund park projects. The HLF have co-produced reports and toolkits that encourage parks to develop their commercial potential. For example, in 2011 the HLF, the Big Lottery Fund and The Land Trust launched 'Prosperous Parks', an income generation toolkit which helps parks to generate ideas for expanding their commercial

activity. Several London parks – including Battersea Park and The Royal Parks – are cited in *Prosperous Parks* as exemplars of commercialisation which other park authorities are encouraged to emulate. The HLF supported by Nesta (the UK's innovation foundation) also commissioned the Rethinking Parks project which tested 'new business models for parks in the twenty-first century' (Nesta 2013; 2016). The neoliberal/commercial emphasis of these initiatives was justified through the notion that new approaches were needed to ensure that public parks would 'remain free, open and valued community assets' (Nesta, 2016, 4). Citing the threat that parks will be closed or sold off unless new financing models are adopted is a common way of legitimising the commercialisation of parks.

There are understandable concerns about the explicit commercialisation of public parks being pursued in the UK and in other neoliberal regimes. These reflect wider anxieties about the commercialisation of urban public spaces (Kohn 2004). Introducing commercial activity means that parks are increasingly oriented towards consumers, with those unwilling or unable to pay unfairly excluded (Madden 2010). Commercialisation sits awkwardly with the history and ethos of public parks as open, accessible spaces that are free to use by anyone. Even small increases in the amount of commercial activity provide precedents for more extensive commercialisation, laying the foundation for more controversial changes – including charging for entry. The greater involvement of private companies in public parks – through sponsorship, product launches and entertainment facilities – erodes their historic function as places that are ostensibly different from the rest of the built environment that surrounds them. And whilst it may be unrealistic to keep the commercialisation of the contemporary city out of public parks, that does not mean we should not try to.

Concerns about commercialisation extend beyond the predictable critique of the denigration of public space: there are also significant issues with the efficacy of commercial funding. For example, whilst commercialisation is justified on the basis that funds are needed to pay for parks, in many instances the revenue earned is not hypothecated and spent on specific spaces, or even parks in general. Instead it goes into general budgets, leading to the accusation that parks are becoming lucrative cash cows for local authorities desperately seeking funds. The lack of transparency about where park revenue goes undermines the rationale for commercial funding. Even when cash is ring-fenced to be spent on the park in which it is earned this creates potential problems. Some parks are better positioned to capitalise on opportunities to generate commercial revenue and these tend to be those surrounded by affluent communities. Therefore, the rise of commercial funding exacerbates existing inequalities in the provision of urban green space (Millington 2015).

The drive for commercialisation is one of the key reasons why responsibility for parks is increasingly being detached from local authorities. To provide incentives to generate more revenue, and to allow that revenue to be spent

on maintaining specific parks, new governance arrangements have been conceived. In some cases, these involve new autonomous or semi-autonomous agencies being established to run individual parks (or a set of parks) on behalf of local authorities. In other instances, partnerships have been established with private companies, with specialised expertise used to increase commercial revenue. For example, the London Borough of Bromley recently appointed a commercial manager for Crystal Palace Park with profits generated by new projects shared 50:50 with the Council. Commercial expertise is something many park authorities do not have, and even when parks are able to employ commercially savvy staff, there are fears that these roles are now being prioritised at the expense of other skills (e.g. horticulture).

Whilst academic texts tend to be highly critical of park commercialisation, this view is not necessarily shared among the general public. A recent survey of park users in the UK ( $n=2,130$ ) revealed that 75 per cent supported more sponsorship by businesses and 59 per cent supported more commercial use (HLF 2016). Commercialisation can achieve more than just financial returns with some anecdotal evidence suggesting the presence of commercial services can make parks feel safer, add to the range of facilities on offer and diversify the profiles of users (Zukin 1995). This suggests that there may be potential for a more progressive commercialisation agenda that aims to achieve more than just revenue.

### Commercial Events

The open space provided by urban parks mean they have always been earmarked as places to stage events. Hyde Park famously hosted the Great Exhibition in 1851 and ever since London's parks have been used to stage a range of events: civic occasions, political rallies, sport events, concerts and exhibitions. However, in recent years, London's parks have been more intensively used for larger, more commercially oriented events. Evidence provided by London and Partners to the London Assembly's Environment Committee suggests that commercial events have increased by 20 per cent in the last two years, with the fastest growth being in major events attended by 5,000–50,000 people (London Assembly 2017). Analysing specific examples of parks reveals even more dramatic growth. For example, in 1991 Battersea Park staged approximately 100 events (Wandsworth Borough News 1991), but twenty-five years later there were estimated to be over 600 events staged there every year (Interview with Wandsworth Borough Council [in 2016]). Many of these are small-scale community or charity events, but the extent of growth illustrates that London's parks are now perceived, used and licensed as event venues.

The growth in park events reflects growth in the events sector more generally, with experiences growing in popularity at the expense of the consumption of material goods (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The increased popularity of

music festivals – and the introduction of new festivals in urban locations – has also contributed to the growth of large-scale commercial events in London's parks. However, there are other factors driving this trend, most notably the need for local authorities to generate income to pay for their parks and other services. Park authorities generate income from events in various ways: by organising their own events and charging for tickets and trading licenses or, as is increasingly the case, by hiring their spaces out to events companies and taking a proportion of the ticket sales. There is even potential to generate income by offering 'pre-event advice services for private events on council land' (Lewisham Council 2016).

Many local authorities in London have set ambitious targets to grow the amount of income they earn from commercial events. Brent Council are 'exploring the potential to hold large scale events in parks aiming for audiences at a minimum level of 2000' to fulfil their target of generating £650,000 from festivals and events in 2017/8 (Brent Council 2017). Lambeth Council has even more ambitious targets – aiming to generate £1.5 million per annum from events staged in five key locations – four of which are parks or green spaces (Event Lambeth 2015). To ensure host parks benefit the Council plans to introduce a Parks Investment Levy which will be charged to each event staged – with commercial events charged 50p per person per day. This replaces the system used in many parks which requires event organisers to pay an environmental impact fee – with these funds directed to park budgets.

London boroughs can earn significant sums from staging single events in their parks. Formula E paid Wandsworth Council £1 million for each week-end of motor racing they staged in Battersea Park in 2015 and 2016 – perhaps the most lucrative events ever staged in a London park. It costs approximately £3.25 million a year to run Battersea Park, so staging the events covered almost a third of the annual budget (Interview with Wandsworth Council [in 2016]). Wandsworth Council do not hypothecate revenue, so the money was not directly allocated to Battersea Park. However, to placate opposition, the Council promised that 20 per cent of the revenue earned would be spent on making specific improvements to the host Park. Because they were worried about being undercut by other London boroughs, and because Formula E were worried about offending other hosts who were not getting such a generous deal, the Council did not initially reveal how much the contract with Formula E was worth (Interview with Wandsworth Council [in 2016]). Councils are often reluctant to disclose how much they are being paid by event companies but this lack of transparency often breeds suspicion amongst local residents.

The fees each year paid by Festival Republic – organisers of the Wireless Festival – to Haringey Council also represent a significant proportion of the local authority's parks budget. For the 2016 edition, £446,264 in fees was generated by this three-day event (Haringey Borough Council, 2016) and, according to Haringey Council, the income from Wireless is spent on maintaining and improving the park. However, critics suggest that rather than supplementing



**Figure 10.1:** Battersea Park hosted controversial Formula E Motor Races in 2015 and 2016 (Photo: Andrew Smith).

the parks budget, this income is merely offsetting ongoing cuts. Staging these events provides a justification to reduce funding for parks, leading to a situation where parks have become reliant on precarious commercial income, rather than public funds. The Chair of the London Friends of Green Spaces Network suggests, that the attitude of Haringey Council is:

if Finsbury Park is generating £700,000 or £800,000 a year, we'll take that money off the core budget for the entire park service. And to be honest, that is more than 50 per cent of the budget. So what they've done is effectively mortgaged the entire park service to be totally dependent on the commercial concerts in Finsbury Park. (Interview with Chair of London Friends of GPN [in 2016])

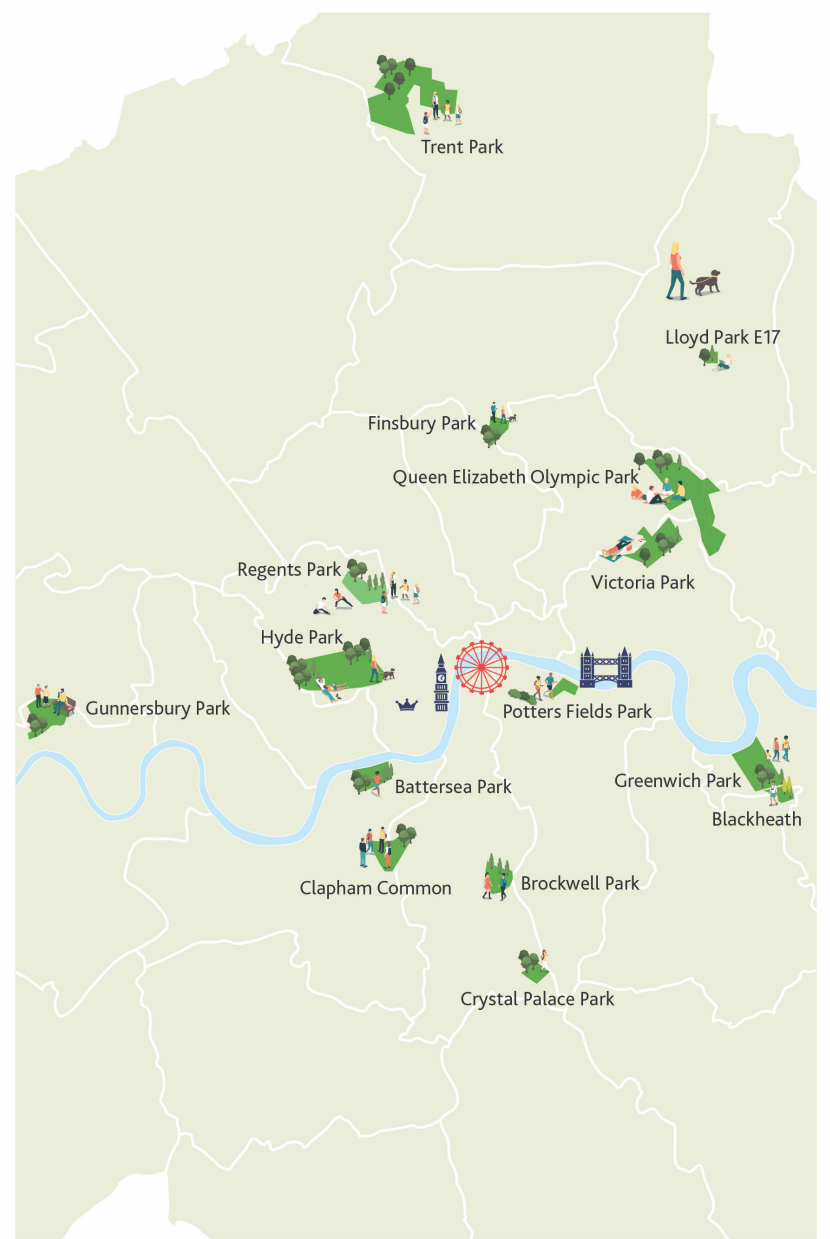
Events are seen as particularly attractive ways of generating revenue for parks because they can deliver wider benefits too. They add to the range of attractions that parks offer, bringing in new uses and diversifying the profile of people who visit. However, there is little hard evidence that events do diversify park users, and when new users are attracted, they tend to be those willing and able to spend (Interview with Parks Alliance [in 2016]). There are also longer-term benefits via the promotional effects of events that are represented in a range of

traditional and social media. In an era of place marketing, events are seen as useful ways of promoting parks and enhancing the ways that they are perceived by target audiences. A recent report published by the London Assembly (2017) suggested that one of the key challenges facing some of London's parks is their lack of visibility. Events provide an obvious way of addressing this challenge. The need to be more visible is related to wider commercialisation as parks now need to drive demand for commercial services and attractions. There is also a danger of aestheticisation, the 'superficial embellishment of public space into visually appealing lifestyle amenities and domains of experience' – something that breeds exclusion (Glover 2015, 104).

As the recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Public Parks revealed, the increased use of parks as venues for commercial events has been met with a great deal of resistance. The amount of time and space occupied by these events is deemed to be inappropriate by other users. Events interrupt the everyday use of parks and installations often take a long time to set up and take down, causing significant disruption. The presence of large crowds and heavy vehicle movements cause damage to turf (particularly after wet weather) and this can mean park environments are inaccessible for long periods of time while they are regenerated. The weekend long SW4 music festival staged on London's Clapham Common in 2014 provides an illustrative example. The set-up of this festival began on 18 August, but due to the extended time it took to repair the damaged site, fences were not removed until 23 October. This type of disruption often takes place in the summer months when parks are most heavily used – maximising the displacement of everyday users.

Alongside concerns about the environmental damage and disruption to access, there are also significant ideological issues associated with events. Staging ticketed events commercialises park space in several interrelated ways: by turning parks into commodities that are offered for hire; by introducing charges to access parks; by normalising the presence of commercial vendors; and by providing platforms for sponsorship that wouldn't otherwise be permissible. Therefore, whilst events involve temporary installations, they have enduring effects on the ways our public parks are conceived and experienced, including material legacies. Opponents have suggested that some of the physical changes made to parks to allow them to stage events have been deliberately retained to facilitate further commercialisation. For example, the Battersea Park Action Group suggested that the extra tarmac laid down to stage the Formula E Grand Prix in 2015 was retained to allow the park to accommodate film trailers. The failure to restore the original gates to Greenwich Park after it staged the Olympic equestrian events was also seen by local campaigners as a change designed to facilitate the lorry movements needed to stage future events (Smith 2014).

Whilst complaints about events staged in London parks are nothing new, as the number and size of events has grown, opposition has intensified. In some instances, for example in Battersea Park (in Wandsworth) and Finsbury Park



**Figure 10.2:** The London Parks that host Major Events (mainly Music Festivals) every Summer (© Mason Edwards).

(Haringey), resistance has focused on specific events deemed to be inappropriate. In 2015 and 2016, Battersea Park hosted Formula E motor races which were vehemently resisted by the Battersea Park Action Group, whose campaigning eventually resulted in the races being discontinued. In Finsbury Park the Friends group have campaigned for several years against Wireless – a three-day music festival that is staged every July. In other instances, for example in Gunnersbury Park (Hounslow/Ealing) and Victoria Park (Tower Hamlets/Hackney), ongoing complaints about events are based more on the regularity with which they are staged. Opposition to events tends to be dominated by local concerns over access, disruption, noise and damage, but more ideologically driven resistance to the event driven commercialisation of urban parks is emerging. For example, in December 2016 the Open Spaces Society – the UK's oldest conservation body – launched its 'Save our Spaces' campaign to tackle the 'abuse' of parks in England and Wales. They cited events in various London boroughs as egregious examples of inappropriate commercial exploitation.

### Victoria Park

Staging commercial events in London's public parks divides opinion. Whilst this trend has generated a lot of opposition, there are also many people who like the opportunity to attend festivals, events and exhibitions in their local park. The way users feel about park events is explored in more detail here through the case of Lovebox – a music festival that was staged in Victoria Park in East London every summer until 2017. Just before the 2016 occurrence of this event an article written by the author about park events (entitled: 'Is it right to use public parks for commercial events?') was posted on The Friends of Victoria Park Facebook site. This provoked a large number of interactions and these are analysed below to help understand the different views about this event.

Lovebox is a two-day music festival staged every July which has become a favourite haunt for London's cool hipster crowd. The event was held in Victoria Park from 2005–2017, regularly attracting crowds of 40,000 people per day – making it one of London's largest music festivals. This is an expensive event – tickets for the weekend cost over £100. The organisers, Mama Festivals – part of the Live Nation Entertainment company which dominates the music festival market – paid Tower Hamlets Council around £300,000 every year for the rights to use Victoria Park and some of this money was used to fund park improvements. Posts to the Friends of Victoria Park Facebook group suggested that opinion about Lovebox amongst local residents was divided 50/50.

Most opponents of Lovebox were not against staging events in general; they just felt this particular event was too big for Victoria Park. They also felt the event occupied too much time: 'a two day festival is actually more like a month's festival as there's the build-up, break down and recovery of [the] damaged area.' Unsurprisingly, the noise of the event was the cause of several



**Figure 10.3:** Lovebox – One of London’s biggest Music Festivals now staged in Gunnersbury Park (Photo: Andrew Smith).

complaints, with one resident moaning that ‘the music vibrates my windows and walls’. Others were concerned about disruptive effects on ‘the peace of the park’ and worries were expressed about the likely impact on wildlife and ‘the natural rhythms of nature’. Some people felt that too much of the money earned went to the festival organisers not the Council, which led one respondent to recoil at the ‘profiteering’ involved. A recurring theme was the strong dislike of the oppressive structures used to fence off the festival site which were described as ‘hostile and aggressive’ by one contributor and as ‘prison walls’ by another. The sentiments of those who opposed staging Lovebox in Victoria Park were summed up neatly by one contributor who simply stated: ‘I’m for letting parks be parks’.

Despite the resistance to Lovebox expressed by many contributors to the Friends of Victoria Park Facebook group, roughly an equal amount of people who responded to the post supported the event, mainly because of the money it generated for the Council and the improvements to the Park that had been made as a result. Negative impacts were acknowledged, but many felt the inconvenience and disruption were limited to a few weekends of the year – so were justified. The wider economic impact was also cited when people justified their support: ‘It raises the profile of our area and provides a boost to local businesses’. Advocates felt that the events provided local residents with

convenient access to great music and generated valuable experiences for the young people who attended. One contributor even felt the event contributed a (rare) feeling of togetherness amongst park users: 'even in the park so many of our experiences seem to be fairly solitary and almost in spite of one another (cyclists vs dog walkers etc). Festivals, free and paid for, give us the chance to be a bit collective'. This social dimension meant that some people supported the event despite their wider concerns about park commercialisation: 'I have a problem with the growing corporatisation of public spaces generally and Victoria Park in particular. But private events like Lovebox for me are fine (and fun) because they host great music and bring a lot of people together to enjoy the park'.

The views outlined above highlight the issues facing large, well located parks in London which are increasingly used to stage large-scale music festivals. The event has now been moved to Gunnersbury Park in Hounslow, and the same debates have re-emerged there about the controversial transformation of this Park into a venue for a large-scale music festival. Similar events also take place in Hyde Park (City of Westminster), Trent Park (Enfield), Brockwell Park (Lambeth) and Finsbury Park (Haringey). These commercial incursions are justified as ways to generate much needed revenue for local authorities, and they are supported by a section of local residents who like the opportunities for entertainment they provide. This builds affinity for old-fashioned parks amongst young residents. However, these events are extremely divisive as they involve a trade-off between income generation and the accessibility/integrity of park spaces. Large-scale music festivals are one of the few types of event that can bring in sufficient amounts of money to help with the financial crisis affecting local authorities, but these events are also the most controversial and disruptive. This illustrates the unenviable dilemmas faced by local authorities tasked with maintaining London's parks.

## Governance

The increased number of events staged in London's parks affects the ways that London's parks are used but it is also beginning to affect the ways they are governed. The potential to generate revenue from events – and the difficulties maximising and ring-fencing income within conventional local authority structures – mean that new organisations are being created. For example, in 2015 Wandsworth Council created a new company called Enable Leisure and Culture and awarded it a four-year contract to manage its parks and cultural services. The company is set up as a staff mutual – incentivising staff to increase revenue and cut costs – and it aims to become like other social enterprises that have grown by bidding for service contracts in other local authorities. Enable Leisure and Culture has a strong events focus, and one of the reasons it was established was to allow the Council's existing parks and

events teams to work closely together within a new structure that allows the income earned from park events to be spent on parks. This new company illustrates how the new focus on events leads to shifts in the ways parks are governed and managed.

In other cases, rather than responsibility for all the parks in a Borough being outsourced to a separate company, more focused organisations have been established to manage individual parks. Potters Fields Park in Southwark is one such example. Before it was redeveloped into a more formal space this former bomb site was a wildlife park, run by a charity that managed temporary parks on undeveloped land. The transformation of loose space into a tightly landscaped park reflects the transformation in governance arrangements. Potters Fields Park is now managed by a dedicated Trust which generates its own revenue and ring-fences this money to be spent exclusively on the Park. The land is still publicly owned and is subject to Southwark Council's byelaws, but Potters Fields Park does not need any public funding for maintenance because of the income it generates. Over two thirds of this income is earned through events and the Trust employs two members of staff to manage park events that are staged on up to 56 days per year. The Park is located next to Tower Bridge and this creates demand from companies seeking to stage product launches and other commercially-oriented events there. This seems like an efficient way of funding a park, but the regularity with which these events are staged undermines the notion that this is open and public space. Ultimately, Potters Fields Park represents a new model of public space provision where parks are funded by allowing them to be privatised temporarily.

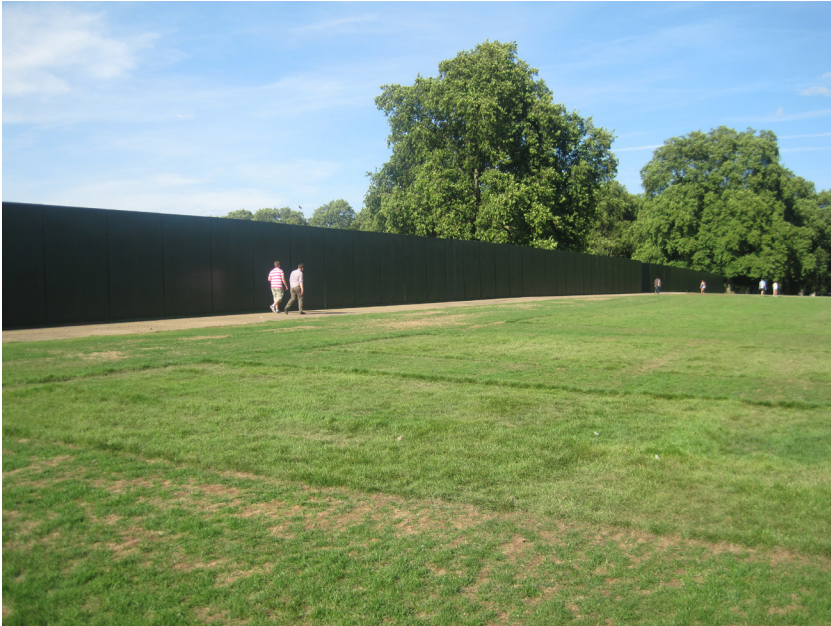
The new structures outlined above represent typical examples of the ways public service management is changing in the era of neoliberalism. These arrangements are criticised by many commentators who feel they undermine the democratic tradition of local government and encourage a culture where management is driven by financial motivations. The new arrangements have significant social justice implications. Some parks are more able to generate more commercial funding than others, and these parks tend to be those that are located in affluent areas. Therefore, the rise of commercial funding and associated governance structures are likely to exacerbate the inequitable access to quality park space that already exists in London (London Assembly 2017). Rather than detaching 'prosperous parks' from local authority control, as has happened in Southwark, it seems fairer to redistribute income earned by parks to those that are not in a position to generate large amounts of commercial revenue. This approach – adopted by Wandsworth Council – prevents the pernicious mode of park neoliberalisation criticised by Millington (2015) and other authors. However, even this model creates problems as there is a temptation to use high profile parks as revenue generating 'cash cows' to subsidise others. Perhaps the best example is Finsbury Park where critics have summarised Haringey Council's approach to park management as: 'We need the money, therefore

we have to sacrifice Finsbury Park for the good of the rest.' (Interview with Chair of London Friends of GPN [in 2016]).

## Regulation

One way of controlling the event takeover of London's parks is through effective regulation. Staging events in London parks is regulated through various planning and licensing requirements, giving local authorities the opportunity to ensure that park space is not overwhelmed or denigrated by inappropriate events. Many London parks are now licensed premises, but anyone seeking to stage an event in a public park still needs permission from the local authorities – with decisions guided by outdoor events strategies or dedicated park event policies. The latter are now produced by several London boroughs to control the number, size and nature of events that can be held in specific parks. For example, Enfield's new Parks Events Strategy 2017–2022 limits the number of events staged in each of the Borough's parks to eight in small parks and ten in larger ones. The timing of events is also controlled by these policies. Several of London's local authorities stipulate that major events (those catering for more than 5,000 people) cannot be staged in the school summer holidays and some policies indicate there must be a certain amount of time between major events (e.g. Hounslow). If event structures are to remain in place for more than 28 days, or if they are particularly extensive, then planning permission is also required. The obvious issue with all these regulatory mechanisms is that they are controlled by local authorities – but we know that these authorities are desperate to generate income to offset budget cuts. However impartial and scrupulous their planning and licensing procedures are, there is an inherent incentive to sanction lucrative events (Smith 2016).

There is also other legislation that is designed to help protect public open space from excessive commercial use. The Greater London Parks and Open Spaces Order 1967 applies to local authority owned parks and, whilst it permits the provision of 'amusement fairs and entertainments', it stipulates that spaces enclosed or set apart 'should not exceed in any open space one acre or one-tenth of the open-space, whichever is the greater'. This legislation seems to protect London's parks from excessively large events that take up an unreasonable amount of park space. How often 'amusement' can be staged is also regulated: the Order states this must be limited to 35 days and to a maximum of eight Sundays. Commercialisation is specifically regulated by the stipulation that 'the areas occupied by the paraphernalia of sales must not exceed one tenth of the area of the open space occupied by the function in question'. The 1967 Order anticipated the potential for conflict between event uses and everyday uses of London's parks – providing useful legislation to regulate competing demands for park space in the contemporary era.



**Figure 10.4:** Fences erected to stage Music Festivals in Hyde Park every summer (Photo: Andrew Smith).

However, several large events staged in London in recent years seem to contravene this legislation. Formula E events in 2015 and 2016 enclosed over 90 per cent of Battersea Park for four days and approximately 27 per cent of Finsbury Park is used for the Wireless Festival. This was the basis for the legal action undertaken by The Friends of Finsbury Park in 2016 when they applied for a Judicial Review of Haringey Council's decision to permit the Wireless Festival. The judge overseeing the case ruled that subsequent legislation (The Local Government Act 1972) meant the Council were entitled to stage this event. This decision was upheld in the Court of Appeal and so it would appear that London has lost the protection afforded to it by the Greater London Parks and Open Spaces Order 1967. A *laissez faire* regulatory landscape where local authorities can choose to do anything they like with parks they control means London threatens to overtake New York at the vanguard of park neoliberalisation. Whilst a series of large-scale music festivals have been sanctioned in London's parks, New York's Parks Department have adopted a much more cautious approach. In December 2016, three separate applications to stage music festivals in Corona Park – from AEG, Live Nation and the Madison Square Garden Company – were turned down. The reasons cited by the Commissioner of the Parks Department reflect the arguments made by event opponents in London:

Given the proposed duration of your three-day festival and the large amount of the Park that would be occupied for an extensive period of time, including the load in, load out and the actual event, the Department has determined that the Park is not a viable venue for an event of this size and duration.

## Conclusions

This chapter has identified how and why London's parks have become more intensively used as venues for commercial events. Urban parks are notoriously contested spaces, and the rise of commercial events adds to the reputation of parks as disputed territories. These conflicts are perhaps best understood as inevitable struggles between interests that value parks for their everyday use value, and those that seek to realise the exchange value of parks. The latter include event organisers, who use park venues to add value to their events, and local authorities seeking to generate revenue from public assets. Staging events has helped London's local authorities generate much needed income, but there is a danger that some Boroughs are now overly reliant on single events or over-exploited parks. Events are a relatively unreliable source of revenue given their high failure rate and due to the growing competition between park venues for events. There are other issues too. As with other forms of commercial income, it is not always clear how money earned from events is spent – and this undermines the notion that events are justified because they help to pay for parks.

There is a danger of over-exaggerating the 'threat' posed by events, but the increase in the number and scale of events has important implications for London's parks. First, it affects the physical, symbolic and financial accessibility of much needed green space. Every time a ticketed event is staged the amount of genuinely public space available to use is diminished. These events communicate the message that parks can be bought and fenced off, and these barriers erode the public feel and visual appeal of parks. Second, events – and the assembly/de-rig work needed to stage them – make London's parks more like the rest of the city, i.e. dominated by commercialism and construction work. Whilst this may please those stakeholders seeking to ensure Victorian-era parks remain relevant in the twenty-first century, it erodes London's reputation as a city punctured by green havens. And, third, whilst events are temporary, they can also have more permanent effects on the parks that host them. By normalising commercial activity in parks, they provide precedents for further commercialisation and their increasing influence over new governance arrangements also represents a longer-term legacy. The rise of events also contributes to the broader commercialisation agenda as they are used as vehicles to enhance the visibility and image of parks. As parks are generating more income from commercial sources, there is an incentive to attract more tourists – and events are

a good way of attracting the attention of these audiences. In this sense, events help to integrate parks into the wider visitor economy, transforming London parks from amenities into destinations.

London's parks should continue to stage well managed events, but the discussion in this chapter shows there is a need to protect parks from over-exploitation and over-commercialisation. Limiting the amount of park space and the number of days that major events are allowed to occupy seems justified; and these limits should incorporate days when events are being set and taken down. It is important to maximise the amount of public space still available during events and key facilities – playgrounds, sport facilities – should remain accessible. To avoid some of the conflicts seen in London during the summer of 2016, there needs to be more input from local user groups into decision-making about events/event policies and better communication with residents about what events are happening and how they will affect parks. More transparency about how much money is generated by events and where this income goes would also help to better justify many of the large-scale events that are now staged in London's parks.

Staging major events in London's parks is a contested topic which divides opinion. A useful way of summarising the different arguments made to justify or resist this trend is through references to openings and closures. Opponents feel that events close down parks, disrupting use and restricting access – changes which they feel undermine the publicness of parks. Advocates argue the opposite – suggesting that events help to keep parks open – by generating much needed funds and by opening up traditional parks to new uses and users. Hence, event advocates argue that events make parks more public. One way to reconcile these contrasting views is to understand park events as agents of de- and re-territorialisation, in other words as interventions that both open up and close down public space. Music festivals, motor races and other large-scale events de-territorialise parks by challenging established meanings and identities, but they also re-territorialise parks as spaces of consumption for non-local users: tourists and visitors. This expansion and extension of commercial activity into London's green spaces is driven by the policies and rhetoric of neoliberal austerity – a context in which the traditional way of funding parks (through taxation and public finances) – is no longer deemed viable. In this sense, discourses of crisis are once again being used as a vehicle to push through changes to public park management.

## References

- Brenner, Neil and Nick Theodore. 2002. 'Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism"'. *Antipode*, 34(3), 349–379.
- Brent Council. 2016. *Report for Scrutiny on Civic Enterprise (Income Generation)*. Available at <http://democracy.brent.gov.uk/documents/s45897/Income%20Generation.pdf> (accessed 7 December 2018).

- Davidson, Mark. 2013. 'The Sustainable and Entrepreneurial Park? Contradictions and Persistent Antagonisms at Sydney's Olympic Park'. *Urban Geography*, 34(5), 657–676.
- Event Lambeth. 2015. *A New Events Strategy 2015–2020*. Available at <https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/new-events-strategy-2015-to-2020.pdf> (accessed 1 September 2017).
- Glover, Troy. 2015. 'Animating Public Space'. In Sean Gammon and Sam Elkington, eds, *Landscapes of Leisure*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Haringey Borough Council. 2016. Freedom of Information Request Response. Available at [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/financial\\_implications\\_of\\_wireless\\_festival](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/financial_implications_of_wireless_festival) (accessed 7 December 2018).
- Heritage Lottery Fund. 2016. *State of UK Parks 2016: Research Report*, September.
- Kohn, Margaret. 2004. *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*. London: Routledge.
- Krinsky, John and Maud Simonet. 2011. 'Safeguarding Private Value in Public Spaces: The Neoliberalization of Public Service Work in New York City's Parks'. *Social Justice*, 38 (1/2 (123–124)), 28–47.
- Lewisham Council. 2016. *Income Generation Opportunities Review*. London: Lewisham.
- London Assembly. 2017. *Park Life: Ensuring London's Green Spaces Remain a Hit with Londoners*. Available at <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/london-assembly-publications/park-life-ensuring-green-spaces-remain-hit> (accessed 7 December 2018).
- Loughran, Kevin. 2014. 'Parks for Profit: The High Line, Growth Machines, and the Uneven Development of Urban Public Spaces'. *City and Community*, 13(1), 49–68.
- Madden, David. 2010. 'Revisiting the End of Public Space: Assembling the Public in an Urban Park'. *City and Community*, 9(2), 187–207.
- Millington, Nate. 2015. 'From Urban Scar to "Park in the Sky": Terrain Vague, Urban Design, and the Remaking of New York City's High Line Park'. *Environment and Planning A*, 47(11), 2324–2338.
- Nesta. 2013. *Rethinking Parks: Exploring New Business Models for Parks in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Available at <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/rethinking-parks-new-business-models-for-parks/> (accessed 7 December 2018).
- Nesta. 2016. *Learning to Rethink Parks*. Available at <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/learning-to-rethink-parks/> (accessed 7 December 2018).
- Perkins, Harold. 2009. 'Turning Feral Spaces into Trendy Places: A Coffee House in Every Park?'. *Environment and Planning A*, 41(11), 2615–2632.
- Pine, Joseph and James Gilmore. 1999. *Experience Economy-Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Rosol, Marit. 2010. 'Public Participation in Post-Fordist Urban Green Space Governance: The Case of Community Gardens in Berlin'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 34(3), 548–563.

- RoyalParks, The. 2016. *Annual Report and Accounts 2015/6*. Available at: [https://www.royalparks.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/64265/FINAL-Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2015-16.PDF](https://www.royalparks.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/64265/FINAL-Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2015-16.PDF) (accessed 7 December 2018).
- Smith, Andrew. 2014. "Borrowing" Public Space to Stage Major Events: The Greenwich Park Controversy'. *Urban Studies*, 51(2), 247–263.
- Smith, Andrew. 2016. *Events in the City: Using Public Spaces as Event Venues*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Smith, Harry, Dempsey, Nicola, and Mel Burton. 2014. 'Coordinating Place-Keeping: Towards More Sustainable Places'. In Nicola Dempsey, Harry Smith and Mel Burton, eds, *Place-Keeping: Open Space Management in Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wandsworth Borough News. 1991. 'Preserving the Patchwork'. *Wandsworth Borough News*. 8 November.
- Zukin, Sharon. 1995. *The Cultures of Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell.