Alias Greenway: What's in a Name?

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Abstract

The past 15 years has seen a proliferation of linear parks in the urban areas of the US and abroad. Many are named similarly: High Line (NYC), Hi Line Connector (Dallas), Beltline (Atlanta), Lakeview Low-Line (Chicago), Goods Line (Sydney), Camden Highline (London), and Underline (Miami). These have been scaffolded on to rail lines that either co-exist or have been reused.

Yet, aside from consistency in park naming, a consistent and more inclusive term for this landscape type that captures the spatial aspect of these linear spaces has not been widely adopted. Terms used still primarily refer to origin, like *parkways* or *boulevards* in relation to roads, or *waterfront* and *riverfront* in relation to seaports or rivers, or *rail to trail* or *rail-trail* in relation to railroads. Or names focus on one function like *wildlife corridor*, *green infrastructure*, *hike and bike trail*, *bikeway*, *promenade*, or *trail*. Often, legal classifications are the ways these are described with *right of way*, *greenbelt*, *brownfields*, and *scenic trail*. These separate terms mask and obscure the advantages and co-benefits that are features of this shape of open space.

In the context of a practice-based research project on four transit infrastructures—ports, rivers, rails, and roads—the author revisits naming and terminology and how it has evolved since the term *greenways* first appeared in the 1950s and *linear park* in the late 1930s. Though uncommon in landscape architecture, this paper argues for a more formalist approach to this open space typology in terminology. The characteristics and opportunities inherent in linear systems offer advantages in terms of movement, transportation, species, and nutrients as well as linkages comprising a network. Capturing these in name, whether it be *greenway*, *corridor*, *linear park*, *thin park*, or something new, is an important project that can codify this landscape type and highlight its important functional aspects.

Introduction

When is a name useful? Place names are certainly useful to be able to tell someone where to meet you. Names are useful for leaders and developers in early stage projects to project a vision, when there is just an ugly tract of bare earth. But most interesting to me, names are useful to designers. I think it is an underappreciated part of practice—communication through naming is a powerful tool we can better wield. As designers we must communicate form and function to clients for funding, to stakeholders for support, and to our multidisciplinary teams for harmonizing efforts. A name for a design proposal must simultaneously be easily grasped, compelling, and convey its significance. It can encapsulate a place, a type (or precedent), a shape, a function/use, an aspiration, and/or a concept.

I often cite the term "green infrastructure" as a name that was wildly successful in mobilizing

action and adoption of a landscape concept. It first appears in the literature related to greenway planning in the US (Seiwert & Rößler, 2025), and was applied (misleadingly) by the EPA in 2007 to refer to stormwater control practices used to comply with the Clean Water Act (Grabowski et al., 2022). Later, in the EU, adoption of the original meaning expanded to the network scale, defined as "a strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas…designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services, while also enhancing biodiversity" (European Environment Agency. 2025). Refinement of the concept and implementation continues with popular appeal (Mell, 2017). The term is versatile, evocative, and conveys importance.

Other related green concepts deployed in landscape planning—greenways, greening, blue-green infrastructure, greenspace planning, and natural infrastructure—have not been as sticky. The concept of nature-based solutions (NbS), first mentioned in 2008, however, is gaining traction (Hanson et al., 2020). In the following I explore how form and function might better be communicated by designers for better adoption and action.

Shifts in Naming

Place names are the oldest form of park naming, and often have common themes. They often refer to important people, features, conditions or conflicts, according to topologists who study place names (Harrington, 2023). Park names in the US have followed these general place name themes. For instance, Balboa Park in San Diego and Overton Park in Memphis (person), Central Park in New York (location), Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and Prospect Park in New York (feature), Gas Works Park in Seattle and Railroad Park in Birmingham, Alabama (history), Forest Park in St. Louis and Falls Park on The Reedy in Greenville, South Carolina (condition), and Battle of Ft. Dearborn Park in Chicago and Memorial Park in Houston (conflict). Place name themes occur in newly created and old public spaces.

Older park names also often refer to a traditional landscape type—garden, square—such as the National Mall, Boston Common. More recent open spaces created in less traditional ways from less traditional parcels often incorporate a novel landscape type in the name. Coney Island Beach and Boardwalk in New York, Charlesbank Playground in Boston, San Antonio River Walk, Alewife Linear Park, and Cherry Creek Greenway are some.

Most recently, in naming contemporary park and open spaces, themes are combined with and emphasize the shape of the space. In Paris, the *Promenade Plantée*, a famous elevated park on a former railbed, was renamed according to its shape in 2013, 20 years after opening. The new name, *La Coulée Verte René-Dumont* translates literally as the green course, or green flow. No longer suggesting what activities should happen upon it—promenading—its name now emphasized a likeness to a river within the city, a linear geographic element. Today the primary users seem to be runners, a contested use, as evidenced by small signs that read "This place is a walking space. The practice of jogging is tolerated to the extent that it does not bother the promenaders." (translated from the French, Author, 2025).

Other rail projects seem to want to recall the success of the High Line in New York City with their names, which opened approximately 15 years ago. In fact, there is a bit of an epidemic. There is the Hi Line Connector in Dallas, The Beltline in Atlanta, the Lakeview Low-Line in Chicago, the Goods Line in Sydney, the Camden Highline in London, and the Underline in

Miami. These examples all have scaffolded public space onto rail lines and either co-exist with them or entirely remake them.

There are recent efforts that have not resulted in emphasizing linear forms. In 2025, the City of San Francisco mounted an effort to name a new city park created from closing the Great Highway, a road at the city's western border at the Pacific Ocean. The city's goals for the name were to: 1) honor the local history and place names, 2) capture the unique natural features of the area, 3) resonate with the values and spirit of the residents, 4) be unique and memorable, and 5) be easy to understand and pronounce. Common place name themes came through in the 15 options put forward in a second public survey: *sunset*, *pacific*, *coast*, *fog*, *surf*. Shape names were also equally strong: parkway, esplanade, line, edge, way. But the shape was ultimately deemphasized in deference to the natural features, which for this park, are formidable. With public input from the survey, the Recreation and Park Commission determined that the name of the park would be Sunset Dunes (Survey, 2025; San Francisco Recreation and Parks, 2025).

But the emergence in naming to emphasize a park's shape, especially for thin parks, is perhaps due to our increasing use of maps, where a top down view is so easily accessible and often one's first encounter with a place.

Typomorphologial Classification: Emphasizing Form and Function

For the field of landscape architecture, I would like to argue it is time to work out a typomorphologial classification for designed landscapes. Type is part of the history of the discipline, but has not been updated or codified, and leaves us with "park" "garden" and "square" –an impoverished language and characterization of contemporary work. As cataloged briefly above, shape is emerging in the social imagination via new park names. However, as designers know, each shape, scale, and pattern have particular performance attributes.

Architects use typological classification in architectural education extensively. Students study a building typology based on its function, such as a school, museum, or house. In 1825, Quatrèmere de Quincy, a French architectural theorist, observed that types in architecture function not as an ideal standard to be copied, but rather elements that inform and inspire, and remain open to interpretation and variation (de Quincy, A.C.Q. (1825/1977). Typology, however, is not a timeless architectural concept, and we must regard it as a historically specific way of reading architecture that arose in the 18th century. In addition, landscapes, in contrast to architecture, are often multi-functional and multi-purpose rather than geared toward one outcome like education, art viewing, or dwelling.

Geographers used morphological classification for urban forms, which has now been adopted by some planners and architects (Moudon, 1997). The urban form, which arises from the arrangement of elements (streets, blocks, parcels, and buildings), allows certain outcomes and transformations. (De Oliveira, 2022, Warner & Whittemore, 2012). Shape (and arrangement) is a powerful choreographer in urban life, nudging, determining, and ruling individual behaviors and aggregate outcomes, in for instance the consumption of fossil fuel (Iturbe, 2019). We need to understand a greater link between the function of a space, its shape and size, and its performance socially and ecologically. Translation of landscape ecology concepts into

spatialized guidance for landscape architects was necessary to deploy ecological principals like patches and mosaics into design work (Dramstad et al., 2013). We need to also find a framework to bridge increasingly large scales in the practice of landscape architecture. Adopting tools for thinking about project types from architecture and urban design could help work out a classification for landscape architecture.

So let us review what's established for landscape-inclusive approaches to a typomorphologial classification. One recently published typomorphologial classification for public open space was created in order to inform sustainable urban design (Pattacini, 2021). Pattacini classified open spaces into types, describing qualities, with each variation for streets, public squares, and open space networks. Her open space network types were: wedges, belt, star, fringe, small neighborhood parks, central park, green/blue corridor, and linear park. To be practical for use by landscape architects, this framework is too limited and situated too far in the realm of urban form and city planning.

At the other end of the spectrum, a project that was part of a 2015 EU grant on biocultural diversity nicknamed GREEN SURGE, inventoried all green space elements in the EU, designed or not, and came up with 44 types, which are taken together as green infrastructure (Braquinho, 2015). Shape is an attribute, but not the only factor. This approach is one of many examples that prioritize ecosystem services in classification and inventory, but is also not particularly of use to designers.

Looking beyond the academic literature, non-profit organizations tied in to landscape architecture practice often hold databases of more recent work. In its database, the Cultural Landscapes Foundation has developed a list of types of designed landscapes. It includes 27 types of designed landscapes that range in scale from planned communities to single elements like an amphitheater (TCLF, 2025). The Landscape Foundation, in its case study briefs on landscape performance, has 32 project types that similarly range in scale from mixed use developments and nature preserves to courtyards (LAF, 2025). Within the case study library of The Landscape Institute in the UK, there are only 13 categories of projects, and like it's counterpart in the U.S., ASLA, with 21 types, they mostly relate to kinds of clients (Landscape Institute, 2025; ASLA, 2025). They do not tell us anything about form or function.

Linear Parks and Greenways

What about the names for linear forms? This shape is perhaps the most frequently-occurring one singled out in the typological jumble. The term "linear park" first appeared in a late 1930s US government report whose authors included Arthur C. Comey and Charles W. Eliot, the nephew of Charles Eliot (USNRC, 1939). It evolved to connote more urban conditions. The term "greenways" first appeared in a book by William Whyte in the 1950s, associated with conservation (Fábos, 2004). Today it generally refers to remote or peri-urban conditions. The shape is the same, but the location within a metro area is different.

Other terms for linear projects refer to the transportation infrastructure it is associated with, like parkways or boulevards in relation to roads, or waterfront and riverfront in relation to seaports or rivers, or rail-to-trail or rail-trail in relation to railroads. These linear spaces, whether the origin

was natural or man-made, increasingly make up much of our new open spaces.

Another set of monikers focus on the intended user and their prescribed activity: wildlife corridor, green infrastructure, (meant for the birds and bees) hike and bike trail, bikeway, or trail (meant for the active, recreationally-focused human). And yet another set of terms is determined by legal definitions or protected status: right of way, greenbelt, brownfields, and scenic trail. These separate terms mask and obscure the advantages and co-benefits that are often features of this shape of open space.

Conclusion

A consistent term for this landscape type that captures the spatial aspect of these linear spaces needs to be developed or consolidated for its significance to be conveyed. Though uncommon in landscape architecture, I argue that we need a more formalist approach to open space terminology. The characteristics and opportunities inherent in linear systems offer advantages in terms of movement, transportation, species, and nutrients, as well as linkages comprising a network (Ahern, 1995). Codifying these different types under one name, whether it be greenway, corridor, linear park, or thin park (Kullmann, 2011), is an important project that can codify this landscape type and highlight its important functional aspects.

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