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HOW TO LAY OUT A VERY LARGE GARDEN INDEED:
EDWARD KEMP'S LIVERPOOL PARKS, THEIR HISTORY
AND LEGACY

In 1850, in the wake of two severe cholera epidemics, the Liverpool Improvement Committee advertised for plans for the laying out of new public parks across the city. In 1865, the Liverpool Improvement Act finally enabled the corporation to raise the five hundred thousand pounds needed to realize its ambitious vision. Edward Kemp was to be a key figure in the resultant 'ribbon of parks'. As the designer of both Newsham and Stanley Parks, his style and approach have defined large swathes of the Liverpool landscape for nearly a hundred and fifty years. This paper explores the design and history of Kemp's Liverpool parks and their influence on the wider public parks movement. It concludes with an examination of their social, environmental and economic legacy, and the challenge of preserving and managing these landscapes in the twenty-first century.

Liverpool in the mid-nineteenth century was in a state of almost constant change and expansion. The rapid growth of its mercantile economy had attracted workers from the immediate hinterland, other towns and cities and, of course, the global marketplace that the city now supplied. The urban centre rapidly became crowded and many residents lodged in infamous damp cellars.¹ Such conditions brought with them grave threats to public health and, along with much of urban Britain, in 1832 and 1848–49 Liverpool suffered severe outbreaks of 'the mysterious and terrible disease' of cholera.² The worst affected areas were the city's slums, remote from the green spaces and fresh running water of the surrounding elevated ground. The concentration of disease in these districts drew attention to the environmental divide between rich and poor, with the consequences prompting animosity between the city's labouring and professional classes. As the *Liverpool Mercury* reported in 1832:

owing to the unjustifiable abuse to which the Liverpool professional gentlemen have been subjected [...] caused by the infatuation of the poor persons who have been attached with the cholera, they have been obliged to come to a determination to decline attending patients whose friends will not permit them to be removed to the Cholera Hospitals.³

Evidently, improving the environments inhabited by the city's poorest residents promised greater and wider benefits than simply a healthier, able workforce. In response to these successive health crises, the corporation resolved to instigate a range of new provisions for public health. Proposed improvements included new sanitary water supplies and drains, but most ambitious of all was the proposal to protect, 'layout' and improve open green spaces across the city. The scheme, known as the 'ribbon of parks', led to the creation of three major parks on undeveloped land along the periphery of the growing city centre. The 'ribbon' was to comprise three principal sites. Newsham Park

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(1868) was the first of these to be officially opened to the public, followed by Stanley (1870) and Sefton (1872) parks. The first two of these facilities, and arguably the most challenging, were designed and laid out by Edward Kemp. Notwithstanding Kemp's own observation that 'the south side of a town is decidedly the warmest, and the north-west side the healthiest', the parks he was to create in Liverpool were to the east and north-east of the city centre.⁴ What we see in those two locations today is a hybrid of Kemp's original vision, compromise born of economic and social necessity, and a hundred and fifty years of variable investment and commitment on the part of national and local government.

There was widespread support for the scheme among the town's cultural élites, and the only reservation among critics was that it took such a long time to realize. As in so many other cities, money was a recurrent problem. As *The Porcupine* lamented sarcastically in 1861: 'If men could only be made without impulses, without passions, without relish for variety, without unconquerable desire for amusement, without a defective physical nature craving for fresh air and out-of-door exercise, and other profane and entirely carnal recreations!'⁵ This echoed a sentiment expressed in more conventional and romantic fashion by Kemp eleven years earlier, when in his preface to the first edition of *How to Lay Out A Small Garden* (1850), he wrote:

There is a humanizing and elevating influence about everything that is really beautiful, whether in Art or Nature, that it is almost impossible for the observant wayfarer to stumble upon such objects without being cheered or benefitted, while their effect on those who have them daily beneath their eye is of a still deeper kind.⁶

Clearly, Kemp's personal attitude to landscape, and particularly the design of naturalistic green spaces, was predicated on a belief of their inherent virtue as an inspiration for the human spirit, although for him, as a landscape designer, they also posed a personal and technical challenge. Again, the 1851 preface to his *Handbook of Gardening* acclaims, 'the cultivation of flowers, and the management of a flower-bed or border, improves and elevates the moral character of the individuals exercised upon it, to a degree almost inconceivable'.⁷ Yet, notwithstanding his acknowledgement of the mental and moral benefits of parks and gardens, Kemp also appreciated the medical argument that inspired public investment in urban green space. In *The Parks, Gardens, etc. of London and its Suburbs*, he noted how that city had:

gradually spread itself so completely over the open spaces which formerly surrounded it. [...] And this encroachment on its suburbs has been effected with such comparative slowness, and so silently, that it is only by the occurrence of modern epidemics, producing that attention to sanitary matters which forms such a prominent feature of the present age, that the necessity for good public parks has been duly recognised.⁸

By the time Kemp began work on the Liverpool parks, he was an experienced landscape designer and what would today be identified as a 'greenspace manager'. He was only thirty-two when he wrote *How to Lay Out a Small Garden*, in which he outlined many of the principles he would demonstrate in his public park schemes. Yet, it was not until eighteen years later that Kemp would address the first of the Liverpool plots, Newsham Park, by which time he was fifty years of age and an authority in his own right in landscape architecture. Consequently, his plans for Liverpool were confident, competent and informed by a level of practical realism that may have been missing from some of his earlier ideals.

Kemp's training and professional commissions provided him with numerous opportunities to imagine, design and sculpt landscapes on a grand scale. Within the

context of his larger public projects he perceived, or at least presented, himself as an inheritor of the traditions of John Claudius Loudon (1783–1843), Uvedale Price (1747–1829) and Humphry Repton (1752–1818). Nature was to be admired, but improved upon by design. While much of his published writing focused understandably on the commercially profitable subject of domestic flower gardening, his own *œuvre* was at its clearest and most resolved in less confined spaces. In this sense, his lineage was that of a ‘landskipper’ rather than civic engineer or civil servant, and that gentlemanly approach to his profession is manifest in the schemes he proposed.

NEWSHAM PARK

Wide green spaces, broad carriage drives, sheltering groves, playing fields and an expansive boating lake crossed by a high bridge. [...] Once the *ultima thule* of East Liverpool, Newsham Park is now the most central one in the City.⁹

Newsham Park is today the most neglected of the city’s three great Victorian parks and the site presented Kemp with a variety of significant problems from the start. In 1846, with no small amount of foresight, the Corporation of Liverpool had bought a two-hundred-and-forty-acre estate from the Molyneux family for the sum of eighty-five thousand pounds. The land included a substantial dwelling, Newsham House, and its surrounding parkland. In 1850, it purchased a neighbouring estate for twenty thousand pounds and proceeded to throw the two parks into one, creating a substantial plot for developing a public park and housing development. Although in corporation control from 1850, political restrictions on funding such schemes meant that no development occurred for over a decade. This delay introduced new challenges for any future designer, even before work began, as in 1862 the land was divided by the construction of Sheil Road, and the remaining parkland was further reduced by the arrival of the Bootle railway line in 1863. However, in 1864 it was resolved to transform what remained on one side of the road into a substantial park.

Housing was always intended to be an important aspect of Newsham Park, both architecturally and financially. In Kemp’s first plan, forty-five acres of building land were set aside for housing, encircling the park to the north, south and west. Although the real estate had already been acquired, the sale of land for houses was the means of both raising capital for implementing the scheme and bringing more residents into the area. The park was to be both encircled by, and integrated with, a number of large, detached properties.¹⁰ At Sefton Park this marriage of speculation and public benefit was successful, as can still be seen today in the integration of substantial parkland with grand villas, occupied historically by the city’s wealthy commercial classes. However, at Newsham, the less accessible and less fashionable location deterred both potential residents and builders. Uncertainty about the proposed abattoir next door, as well as the economic recession of the late 1860s, deterred investors further, with the consequence that the first land auction in September 1867 resulted in the sale of only five of the ninety-one building plots available, all of which were sold to the doomed Liverpool Financial Association Ltd.¹¹ A succession of auctions followed, but each was as disappointing as the last.

Rather than find alternative sources of funding, the Corporation of Liverpool’s enthusiasm for the scheme appears to have started to flag. The refusal on the part of the corporation to clarify its position regarding a potential cattle market and slaughter house nearby reveals their apparent ambivalence to the plight of Newsham Park. Rather than pursue alternative sources of funding for the park, it resolved instead to scale back

its ambitions for the development of the site and agreed to allow the construction of smaller, more modest houses on the land. Despite the apparent abundance of housing today, the original intention was to designate a larger portion of the land for speculative development. Had the original plans been realized, the southern section of the park would be a residential street of substantial detached villas.

Fortunately for those who benefit from the open space, the economic failure of the development proposal led to the incorporation of 'spare' land into the wider parkland.¹² However, it was less positive a development for Kemp who found himself with a larger plot but smaller budget. Plans were revised to reflect the small amount of capital available. Economies were made with the size and design to nearly all Kemp's intended features, including lakes, fountains and gates. The original scheme had included an island on the lake, connected to the main park by an ornamental bridge, reminiscent of Joseph Paxton's arrangement at Princes Park. The main drive was to pass over water and would thus have required some substantial structural support.¹³ The financial constraints to which the scheme was increasingly subject resulted in the size of the water features being cut to a modest five acres and the complete abandonment of the main driveway bridge.¹⁴ Other proposed features that would have incurred additional costs for the corporation, such as ornamental lodges, were rejected by the town clerk.¹⁵ Even those features that were built were delayed.

A central component of Kemp's original design for Newsham was a grand boulevard accessible to carriages and punctuated by a series of elaborate and ostentatious fountains. The funding crisis of the 1860s had halted the realization of this plan, and when the park officially opened in 1868, it was without these ambitious features. Additionally, even the revised, more modest lodges and gates were not in place until 1871. Over the following thirty years building plots were gradually sold off, releasing funds for the park. Some of the earliest structures to appear would have been the cast-iron 'pavilions' for pedestrians. Unfortunately, none of these structures survives. However, in 1899, a smart, tree-lined boulevard, Gardner's Drive, finally opened, leading from Prescott Drive to Sheil Road. A year later, four fountains were installed along its route. Three were simple drinking fountains, but the fourth was a dramatic and impressive statement piece. The Della Robbia fountain was designed in the Italian style and named after a family of Renaissance sculptors, particularly Luca Della Robbia, who specialized in tin-glazed terracotta (Figure 1).

The inclusion of a feature in the Della Robbia style reveals much about Kemp's cultural and aesthetic vision for Newsham. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed great public and academic interest across Britain in Renaissance art and architecture, typified by the Arts and Crafts movement and designers such as Phillip Webb and William Morris. The middle-class villas of Liverpool's ruling élite, as well as an increasing number of public buildings, were filled with replica majolica tin-glazed pottery produced by the industrial master potteries of Minton, George Jones and the nearby Della Robbia Pottery in Birkenhead.¹⁶ The decision to transcribe this material into the park landscape was a statement of confidence in both the park scheme and the city's status as the rightful inheritor of Renaissance Italy's mercantile prestige.¹⁷ At twelve feet high and five feet in diameter, the Della Robbia fountain's dramatic arrangement of horses and faux rockery became a popular spectacle among park visitors on hot summer afternoons.

In his enthusiasm for water fountains and features in Newsham, Kemp arguably reneged on his earlier advice that 'the adoption of too great a mixture of styles in gardens is an error that should be specially guarded against. It is the source of numberless little incongruities and improprieties'.¹⁸ However, what may have been a corruption of his



Figure 1. The grand 'Della Robbia' fountain, Newsham Park, c.1910.
 Courtesy: Private collection

purist advice was to evolve as one of the most enduring features of public parks: an eclectic and playful collection of styles, features and attractions.

Newsham Park was intended to provide both new and old inhabitants of this part of the city with an extensive open area for exercise, leisure and entertainment. To this end, Kemp proposed to limit planting on the western side and leave the greensward open for games and walks. By contrast, to the east, an intricate and intimate landscape was created. Described in a one guidebook from 1934 as 'a placid oasis of wood and water amid dusty highways', it provided opportunities for passive and active pursuits.¹⁹ Entirely man-made, the naturalistic section of the park includes two lakes which reflect Kemp's belief in the marriage of art and nature.²⁰ The larger lake was primarily decorative, while across a short cast-iron bridge sits a boating lake (Figure 2). Although smaller than Kemp had intended, the lakes were constructed during the initial laying out process. Water always presented specific challenges to park designers and, despite Kemp's considerable experience and training, it proved impossible to control water levels in the lakes without further intervention. Five years after the park opened, Newsham Mill was completed to maintain water levels. Although its purpose was practical, the mill provided an attractive and unusual feature, albeit not envisaged in the original plan: 'Near a cataract which rushes past an old mill into the large boating lake, there is model yacht pond ever the delight of those toilers of the deep, the "tiddler" fishermen, with bent pin and jam-pot.'²¹ The mill remained in use until the 1920s and was finally demolished in 1954.

For the financial reasons already outlined, Kemp's hard landscaping elements were arguably more compromised at Newsham than in any of his other commissions. The key components of greensward, winding paths and carriageways, water, naturalistic groupings of trees, influenced undoubtedly by Price and Paxton in turn, remained in some form, but they were never to be celebrated to the degree enjoyed by other municipal parks either within the city or further afield. By the early twentieth century it was the horticultural displays in Newsham that attracted most praise, features which owed more to the park keepers and gardeners entrusted with the completed park than with the designer himself.



Figure 2. Bridge at Newsham Park, c.1900. Courtesy: Private collection

The nearby Wavertree Botanic Gardens ensured that the city's parks benefited from a relatively skilled and educated workforce, and by the early twentieth century Newsham Park had its own complex of maintenance sheds and glasshouses, themselves a further compromise of the architect's primary vision.²²

The unpredictable results of the Newsham Park funding model combined with the financial over-optimism of the scheme's early supports within the corporation to thwart many of Kemp's ambitions.²³ Yet, the failure of the land auctions had at least one positive outcome at Newsham Park, as it led to the donation of a large tract of land for a philanthropic purpose, and the subsequent construction of one of the city's most iconic buildings. In 1870, permission was granted to erect a substantial orphanage on an unsold piece of land on the eastern edge of the park. The Seamen's Orphanage (figure 2) was designed by local architect Alfred Waterhouse, who would later design Manchester Town Hall (1877) in a similar and distinctive Gothic Revival style. Other additions and adaptations followed at Newsham. At some point in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the bandstand was added near Prescott Drive.²⁴ In 1902, the aviary was gifted by Councillor J. R. Grant with the aim of yet again reinvigorating the park for a new generation. The birds on show included a collection of brightly coloured parrots, making it a particularly popular attraction among children. Located close to the boating lake and mill, the aviary added to the appeal of the eastern section of the park as a place of visual novelty, in contrast to the sporting culture that was developing in the western parkland. The Newsham aviary was finally dismantled in 1931 and, rather tellingly, the birds relocated to the more privileged Sefton Park to the south. It is perhaps typical of this troubled and compromised scheme that these popular features, with which the park became most associated, were not designed by Kemp and were ultimately introduced and removed as a result of external economic factors. Newsham was never realized to Kemp's full expectation and satisfaction. The economic compromises that affected the plans for housing stock also affected capital investment and the long-term socioeconomic success of the neighbourhood. However, it remains an important document of not only the

ambition but also the realism and pragmatism of Kemp and those entrusted to manage the final landscape.

STANLEY PARK

Located north of Newsham is Stanley Park, Kemp's second scheme within the ribbon of parks. Stanley was always intended as an archetypal people's park. Of the opening of the park in 1870, *The Porcupine* newspaper argued that:

the park is for the people – the people should use it without let or hindrance; and the only conditions imposed on those who enter should be propriety of behaviour. [...] The beggar and the prince should be free to use it on this condition.²⁵

Although villas were again proposed as a means of raising capital sums, by the late 1860s it was clear that this portion of the city was likely to house a growing number of its poorer residents in terrace houses.²⁶ At Stanley, unlike Newsham, this socioeconomic reality was realized in time to adjust budgets and accommodate the shift in the corporation's expectations. The egalitarian principle of a true 'people's park' did not inhibit Kemp's aesthetic ambitions for the site. Just as had been intended for Newsham, and was realized in Kemp's design for Hesketh Park, Southport, at the same time, the Stanley Park plot was divided into distinct areas: one primarily ornamental and the other left open for recreation.²⁷ Towards the west, on high ground, a gently sloping ornamental area was divided into a series of smaller sections, each with a distinct function, including the traditional pastimes of walking and 'taking in' the view which had characterized the city's earliest gardens and walks over a hundred and forty years previously.²⁸

Along the top of the Stanley site, Kemp laid out a formal terrace, which he embellished with a series of flowerbeds of circular and rectangular form, planted densely with colourful displays (Figure 3). Kemp had over three decades of experience in planting and his knowledge of bedding plants is evident in his notes on the pelargoniums,



Figure 3. The Terrace at Stanley Park, c.1905. Courtesy: Private collection

Japanese anemones and variegated foliage he identified in London parks in the 1850s.²⁹ Adjacent to the flowerbeds are a sequence of neo-gothic sandstone pavilions designed by the corporation's own architect, E. R. Robson. Kemp located these striking features conveniently for refreshments and shelter from inclement weather, but also to provide an elaborate pinnacle to the tiered structure of the park as a whole. The terrace certainly proved a popular viewing platform for locals and tourists alike and his mindful response to the vista was a key tenet of both Kemp's private commissions and public schemes.³⁰ In 1850, he had advised garden designers that:

Whatever kind of view is sought to be obtained from a place, can be best compassed where it is situated on a slight eminence; and the rule will hold good, whether the view be [...] of natural scenery, of an arable and agricultural district, of other estates, of a river, or lake, or the sea, of distant hills, or of good individual objects. [...] It is far from being desirable that only the features of nature should be seen from a small place. The better parts of detached neighbouring houses, good public buildings, places of worship, &c., will, if nicely brought into view, give an air of habitation and sociality to a district.³¹

This appeared to have been achieved by Kemp as *The Porcupine* reported that 'the view here is magnificent; and we can hardly say where the park ends, as it appears to be part of the open country, vast in size, rich in wooded embellishments, and picturesque to a high degree'.³²

This illusion was further enhanced by the location of another of Kemp's designed landscapes, Anfield Cemetery (1856–63), immediately beyond the park boundary. Nevertheless, despite all his ingenuity and exploitation of the natural topography of the plot, Kemp did have to compromise on some of his own doctrine as he had previously recommended that:

Rows of houses [...] will be very unsightly and unsuitable constituents of a landscape. And a spot that overlooks a town, except partially, and from a height, and so as to catch merely the principal buildings, need never be sought.³³

At Stanley, Kemp was compelled to accept a far from ideal view and the atmosphere for enjoying the park's landscape was sometimes severely compromised. As the *Illustrated London News* claimed, the view was 'commonly obscured by the smoke of the factory districts' and the terraces to the north-west of the park must surely have been visible to all when the smoke thinned.³⁴

Below the formal terrace, Kemp's original design incorporated a by-then established model of a middle ground of soft, informal landscaping, which complemented the distant natural landscape, beyond which was a more structured series of walks and lakes at the northern extreme of the park.³⁵ Using a similar technique that had been employed at Birkenhead Park, the spoil from the creation of the lakes was retained and sculpted into naturalistic islands and embankments around the water's edge. This conventional 'picturesque' area was to be gradually corrupted over the decades that followed as it increasingly housed the majority of the park's supplementary attractions, including an aviary, a children's dell, a swimming pool and a series of ornamental bridges. However, at the time of the park's official opening in May 1870, it was reserved for promenading and boating. As in Newsham, the bandstand was a later addition, arriving in 1899. Over time, even more features were lost, reintroduced and renamed. The 'rotton row', intended originally and rather ambitiously for horse riding, was eventually renamed a cycle path in the 1920s. Yet, despite these and other corruptions, at Stanley the general topographical shape and principles of Kemp's design have survived in relative tact, reinvigorated by the recent regeneration scheme.³⁶

DISCUSSION

Newsham and Stanley parks remain two of Kemp's most substantial personal contributions to public park design. Although he would collaborate on the design of later public parks, including Congleton Park (opened in 1871) and Queen's Park, Crewe (opened in 1888), the Stanley Park project was where Kemp's personal vision and approach was realized in its purest form. Nevertheless, the principles he espoused in his writings and employed in his landscapes were to influence a generation of landscape architects and corporation surveyors. Given the significant professional debt owed by Kemp to his mentor, Paxton, it can be difficult to isolate specifically Kempian design influences in later parks. However, his application of a number of key features, such as artificial lakes, groves of trees, terraces and formal flowerbeds, helped to establish a formula for urban parks that would be replicated for decades.³⁷ Furthermore, it is possible to identify and recognize Kemp's impact in the pragmatism and adaptability of those who laid out and managed public green space in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While in the early days of public park creation Paxton could afford to indulge his most grand ambitions, Kemp and his successors were forced to accommodate the financial, social and political fluctuations that characterized their professional lives. Kemp's patience and perseverance was perhaps learnt while superintendent of Birkenhead Park, dubbed by Frederick Law Olmsted a 'people's garden', where the principles of truly public park ownership and management for *all* were first realized.³⁸ Notwithstanding the benefits of earlier models, such as pleasure gardens or the part-privatized Princes Park, at Birkenhead the challenges of maintaining public, accessible green space had to be balanced against the ambitious horticultural vision of park designers. Petty crime in the form of vandalism, affray, littering and theft were complications largely unforeseen by the first generation of park designers, and Kemp was among the first to confront these practical challenges on a day-to-day basis.³⁹ Compromising public access to the park in order to protect expensive features and curtail antisocial behaviour must have been tempting. However, to do so would have potentially undermined the entire ethos of the public parks movement. By ensuring that his parks were open to the public, while continuing to evolve at a pace determined by economic conditions and changes in fashion, Kemp made a fundamental contribution to the principle of publicly owned green spaces across the world.

Throughout the twentieth century, Newsham and Stanley followed a similar path to many British public parks. The two world wars had a disastrous impact upon Liverpool's green spaces as iron railings were requisitioned and skilled labour conscripted into military service. In both wars, allotments were created across Liverpool's large Victorian parks to enable local people without gardens to supplement their dwindling rations. After the Great War, the land was returned to its former standard, but while such allotments were generally laid out on the greensward, they could also intersect ornamental flowerbeds and obviously compromised the use of the park for leisure and recreation for the duration of the conflict. The impact of the Second World War was much more drastic and long-lasting. The proximity of Newsham Park to the railway line made it particularly vulnerable to stray bombs and, in January 1941, a bomb dropped directly on the temporary allotments therein. Funds for elaborate planting schemes were understandably reduced and with the loss of glasshouses to bombing, such as that in neighbouring Wavertree Botanic Garden in November 1940, it became increasingly difficult to sustain any semblance of the parks' former horticultural glory. Any ironwork that had survived the first conflict was requisitioned in the second and a shortage of funds in the post-war reconstruction period meant that few damaged features were ever fully restored.⁴⁰ Neglected structures fell quickly into disrepair and many of the

original features were lost including all the iron shelters in Newsham and the corrosion of many at Stanley. Nevertheless, the survival of historic structures, such as the bandstands and the Gladstone Conservatory at Stanley Park, provided a way back for these sites. Newsham Park and surrounding villas were designated a conservation area in 1982. In 2001, it was allocated grade II status and admitted to English Heritage's (now Historic England's) *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest*. At Stanley Park, the regeneration proved to be both radical and successful. Burnt-out shelters are now functional again and the park attracts the kind of diverse spectrum of visitors that Kemp and his contemporaries envisaged. However, the future is unclear and the fortunes of the two parks may well vary significantly. Newsham, in particular, is in a precarious position as its physical fabric continues to deteriorate. In 2006, it was already in disrepair and the past decade has merely accelerated the pace of decline.

The discussion and dispute about how best to fund such large, historic assets rages on as the spiral of decay and neglect continues as a direct result of the serious damage to local authority funding resulting from the government's policy of continued austerity. The Heritage Lottery Fund remains the main, and increasingly the only, funder of large-scale regeneration projects for public parks. However, as any such grant requires a commitment to maintain a site for ten years post-restoration, and many local authorities have effectively no budget at all in the 2018–19 fiscal year for maintaining parks and open spaces, councils are understandably cautious about such commitments. While Stanley Park has benefitted from investment, Newsham remains largely forgotten and untouched. There is a real danger that managed decline will become a strategy rather than an accident, and one of Edward Kemp's most ambitious, albeit compromised, schemes, will be lost forever. It is perhaps ironic, albeit tragic, that one of the most valuable historical lessons we will learn from Kemp's landscapes is the narrative of loss in the face of such positive potential.

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