

What was the purpose of the parks and boulevard system in Kansas City, Missouri?

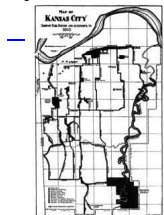
What are the defining characteristics of a boulevard and a parkway?

What makes them different from an ordinary street or each other?

The answers can be found in the 1893 Report of the Board of Park and Boulevard Commissioners (1); “The Kansas City Park System and Its Effect on the City Plan” by George E. Kessler (2); various Annual Reports to the Board of Commissioners; the 1920 booklet “Souvenir” The Park and Boulevard System of Kansas City, Missouri (3) and the historic surveys (4) that were completed in 1989 and 1991.

In 1917 (2) Kessler stated:

“[T]he boulevards and parkways of Kansas City have accomplished the real purpose outlined by Mr. Meyer in the first report [1893], namely, the tying together all sections and the uniting of Kansas City as a whole into a community whose purposes and actions are for the benefit of the city as a whole at all times.”



### 1915 System

There are a variety of roads within the historic system—boulevards, parkways, trafficways and park drives. Although boulevards are clearly defined, there are a couple of exceptions like Meyer Boulevard that is more like a parkway between The Paseo and Swope Parkway because this section was designed as the main arterial entrance to Swope Park. Van Brunt and The Paseo can be considered to be both boulevards and parkways. However, Kessler considered Van Brunt to be a boulevard and The Paseo to be a parkway. Swope Parkway was unique because of the dual streetcar tracks that ran in the wide median and the double row of median trees that separated the tracks from the roadbeds. And then there is Pershing Road that is considered a parkway and a trafficway. The park drive that almost everyone is familiar with is Penn Valley Drive. Kessler specially states that this is not a boulevard or parkway. With a small median containing a single row of trees, it has a design completely different from any boulevard or parkway.

### **Purpose of the Historic Parks & Boulevard System**

- Make communication between the different sections of the city, commercial, residential and to some extent industrial direct and distinctive. (1)

- “. . . tie the slightly localities together and make them one.” (1)
- Make Kansas City a residence city with homeowner communities. (2)
- Fix the best property for residential use purposes only and for residences of the same class. (1)
  - Increase property value by giving a permanent residence character to certain sections of the city and check suburb sprawl. (1)
  - Support healthful minds and bodies by providing rural surroundings and beautiful natural scenery for city residents. (1)
  - Draw businesses and population by providing a beautiful city. (1)
  - Hold the unbroken high lands for residential, and the principal valley lands for transportation and industrial uses.
  - Provide pleasure drives for light driving.

#### Features:

- Gas streetlights of dark color staggered along both sides of the roadway.
- Street markers of blue lettering on white tile, set in sidewalk at intersections.
- “Traffic” gaslights with ruby glass installed in the middle of boulevards on concrete bases to add to the safety of pedestrians and vehicle passengers.

### **Historic Boulevards**



Armour Boulevard looking west past Harrison Boulevard. 1939

“The object of boulevard construction is two-fold; to provide agreeable driveways, and by giving certain special advantages and a handsome appearance to such avenues, to make the abutting land, and the land near them, especially sought after for residence purposes, and thereby to enhance the value of such lands.”(1)

“The chief objects sought in making this class of improvements are to fix for residence purposes the character of the districts through which the boulevards lead, and to provide pleasant driveways leading from populous centers through proper surroundings to points of special interest.” (2)

- Wide, formal, landscaped street with a park-like setting. Symmetrical.

- Standard is 100' right-of-way with 40' roadway and 30' margins for wide grass verges, sidewalks and triple row of same kind of trees almost equally spaced (two between curb and walk and one between walk and property line). 1893 Report description of the margin was 6' of turf, 7' walk and 8' of turf between the walk and property line. Trees were spaced about 45 feet apart with center row staggered.
- The roadway in most boulevards has been widened and the outer row of trees removed for vehicle traffic. The inner rows of trees have not been replaced as they are removed.
- Front walks from the house to the sidewalks did not cross the lawns to the curb.
- Appearance differed "radically" from that of the ordinary street.
- Did not contain purely decorative and ornamental plantings.
- No medians.
- Houses fronted the street.
- Connected with recreation parks and/or parkways.
- Generally followed the formal gridiron street system.
- Multiple points of ingress/egress with intersections at all cross streets.
- Envisioned that the best and most expensive residence will go up along boulevards.

## Historic Parkway



Harrison Parkway looking northeast toward Holmes. 1939

- Generally have sufficient change in alignment and gradient to largely obliterate the impression of formal lines.
- Picturesque drives with or without recreational facilities.
- Where possible occupied the valley lands.
- Unique.
- Multiple transportation and recreation functionality.
- Variable width.
- Limited access.

Defining the characteristic differences between boulevards and parkways is not easy and exceptions are not uncommon as noted earlier.

Boulevard	Parkway
Generally follow the formal gridiron street system	Generally have sufficient change in alignment and gradient to largely obliterate the impression of formal lines.
Multiple egress/ingress points	Limited access, i.e. infrequent intersections, no or few private driveways and so on
No median. Exception is State Parkway in Boulevard	State Parkway has a median
Generally do not contain purely decorative and ornamental plantings	May contain purely decorative and ornamental plantings

No recreational facilities.	Multiple recreational facilities.
No water features.	Water features maybe fountains, pools, or small lakes.
No ornamentations.	May contain ornamentations.
Formal tree plantings with symmetrical tree plantings.	Formal tree plantings with symmetrical tree plantings.
Design consistent from boulevard to parkway.	Design consistent from boulevard to parkway and within parkways.
Standard right-of-way width.	Variable right-of-way width either in whole or part.
Residents almost always live on the boulevard.	Residents almost always live on the boulevard.
Symmetrical. Formal.	Generally asymmetrical but may have some symmetrical sections.

**References**

(1) “The Kansas City Park System and Its Effect on the City Plan,” George Kessler in Good Roads, New York, June 2, 1917.

(2) “1893 Report of the Board of Park and Boulevard Commissioner of Kansas City, MO.”

(3) “Souvenir” Presented by the Board of Park Commissioners of Kansas City, MO., The Park and Boulevard System of Kansas City, Missouri, Revision and Reprint of 1914 Edition, Board of Park Commissioners 1920, Compiled and written by Fred Gabelman. “Scope and Purpose of Park and Boulevard System”, George E. Kessler, Landscape Architect, page 8.

(4) “Historic Resources Survey of the 1893 Parks & Boulevard System, Kansas City, Missouri”, prepared by Deon K. Wolfenbarger for the Prairie Gateway Chapter, American Society of Landscape Architects, 1989. “Landscape Architectural/Historic Survey of Parks and Boulevards, 1893-1940 Kansa City, Missouri,” Volume Two, Board of Parks and Recreation Commissioners, Kansas City, MO., Missouri; Division of Natural Resources, Division of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Jefferson City, MO; Tourbier & Walmsley, Inc., Philadelphia, PA and New York City; Architectural and Art Historical Research, Kansas City, MO; Theis Doolittle Associates, Inc., Kansas City, MO. 1991.

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**1920 Report of Parks & Boulevards**

Parkways  
Total Length of  
Boulevards &  
Parkways—Mile

**Boulevards**

Admiral  
Armour  
Belmont  
Benton  
Brighton

Brookside  
Broadway  
Brush Creek  
Gladstone  
Harrison  
Independence  
Karnes  
Linwood  
Locust St. Trafficway  
Manheim Road  
Maple  
McCoy Avenue  
Meyer  
Prospect  
Rockhill Road  
Rockhill Terrace  
Twentieth Street  
Twenty-six Street  
Thirty-first Street  
Thirty-eighth Street  
Van Brunt  
Valentine Road  
Warwick  
Wyoming Street

Total Boulevards

14.346  
15.608  
10.677  
49.480  
1.101  
35.496  
15.930  
8.538  
32.655  
20.082  
11.618  
27.280  
0.72  
6.478  
3.626  
2.196  
0.534  
63.475  
3.031

24.771  
3.817  
0.321  
3.650  
1.643  
3.570  
56.500  
9.966  
12.658  
0.837

507.748

1.13  
1.25  
0.72  
4.19  
0.18  
2.12  
1.24  
0.74  
2.82  
0.84  
0.96  
2.27  
4.837  
0.56  
0.47  
0.18  
0.08  
2.85  
0.32  
2.47  
0.42  
0.05  
0.31  
0.25  
0.51  
3.25  
0.97  
1.53  
0.00

37.23

**Parkways**

Brush Creek  
Budd Park Esplanade  
Chestnut Parkway  
Gillham Road  
Mill Creek  
The Paseo  
Pershing Road  
Roanoke Parkway  
Sixty-third Street  
Spring Valley Plaza  
Swope Parkway  
Ward Parkway  
West Pennway

Total Parkway

55.414  
3.689  
11.848  
129.056  
37.900  
237.043  
15.804  
15.007  
4.511  
4.179  
63.826  
119.595  
19.481

717.359

0.84  
0.37  
0.32  
4.24  
0.95  
8.81  
0.66  
0.97  
0.60  
0.14  
3.63  
3.95  
1.15

26.63