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Rebuilding Central Park

A Management and Restoration Plan

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OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/5808.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5808.001.0001)

Central Park: A Paradigm for Socially Useful Landscapes

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Central Park is by no means the first public park in the world. London's Hyde Park was opened to the public (on a fee-paying basis) in 1652, and the palace gardens of the Luxembourg and Versailles became public in the 1830s. The Boston Commons has been that since the seventeenth century—i.e., common lands set aside for use by the farmers for grazing their cattle. Both Georgian London and William Penn's Philadelphia had small, private and padlocked parks for use by the surrounding householders. But these were all spaces that entered the public domain by accident, so to say, long after they had been fully structured for other purposes. Central Park is the first grand open space specifically designed for public use, designed as a whole for that purpose and built in one campaign. It is significant, too, that it was sculpted out of raw farm and woodland where comparatively few man-made constructs had been before (the first Croton Reservoir, a fort from the War of 1812 and some farmhouses). In its present form, Central Park is thus a creation *de novo* of two remarkable men—Frederick Law Olmsted and his collaborator, Calvert Vaux.*

*The American Frederick Law Olmsted and the English-trained architect Calvert Vaux jointly won the 1858 competition for the design of the new park under the nom de plume "Greensward." This was to be the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration, which was apparently satisfactory to both partners. At this late date, it is impossible to say precisely which man designed which specific parts of the actual fabric of the Park. But, assuming that Vaux's formal training as an architect qualified him as the active agent in architectural design (e.g., Belvedere Castle, the Dairy, the bridges), then it is equally logical to assume that Olmsted's experience in gardening and scientific agriculture would have made him the principal in landscape design. This, at any rate, has become the conventional approach to their collaborative work and the one that is followed here.

The basic armature of the Park was proven to be amazingly durable, physically as well as aesthetically, even when it is only now beginning to emerge from three quarters of a century of abuse and neglect. It is a tribute to the soundness of the original concept that, although it has lost almost all its original botanical material and is still defaced with the scar tissue of this neglect, it has never lost its sheer scenographic splendor. This splendor is a triumphant example of the nineteenth century "naturalistic" landscape, which is, in fact, an almost wholly man-made artifact, as carefully shaped, cut and polished as the geometric parterres of Versailles. Moving through the Park today, it is difficult to realize that

working with pick axes, shovels, horse-drawn carts and 20,800 barrels of gun powder, an army of laborers manipulated an estimated 4,825,000 cubic yards of earth and rock. This included about 700,000 cubic yards of imported topsoil, imported to supplement the Park's thin glacial till.

Yet the physiognomy of the completed landscape is by no means the single-handed "invention" of Olmsted. On the contrary, one cannot be unimpressed by the sagacity with which he took all the main features of the God-made landscape and used them to establish the parameters of his man-made transformations. This required, first of all, a truly scientific assessment of the basic landforms in which the Park was to be constructed. This the partners did with great precision. Topographically, they found that the tract on which the Park was to be constructed consisted of three basic types: meadow, parkland and woodland, laced with a filigree of brooks, ponds and little marshes. And a careful look at the Park today will reveal that it is composed of precisely these basic landforms: grassy meadows (the Sheep Meadow, Great Lawn, East Meadow and North Meadow); parklands with high shade and little understory growth (the more or less continuous

margins around the edge of the Park); thickets of native undergrowth (the Promontory and the Ramble—these last the hardest of all mini-landscapes to maintain since, left uncontrolled, such growth tends always toward full-scale woodland). Finally, the Park has a range of waters: the Pond in the Southeast Corner, the Lake at the center, the Meer in the Northeast Corner—all lovely little water bodies carved out of the original marshes of drowned streams. These are connected with a system of artfully landscaped brooks, many of them sadly silted up.

Although this terrain was already two and a half centuries distant from the primeval forests the Dutch had purchased in 1624, it had never been converted into tidy farmland, like Long Island across the East River. Its bony, glaciated topography of acid soils, thinly spread over schist and granite, did not encourage agriculture. The forests had long since been slaughtered, the second growth burned for charcoal. Contemporary photographs show that Olmsted began with a bare wasteland of squatters' shacks, tethered goats and garbage dumps at the south end, though there was a thin scattering of modest cottages and farmhouses in the north.

Central Park was actually designed in the dominant Romantic idiom of the mid-nineteenth century. The most powerful American advocates of this view of nature were the painters of the Hudson River School—artists who between the 1820s and 1880s had created a cult of natural beauty around such scenic spots as the Hudson Valley, the Catskills and Niagara Falls. Olmsted would have been thoroughly immersed in such images, as he would have been in the landscape theories of A.J. Downing, the autodidact nurseryman whose immensely successful books on landscape theory and garden design consistently extolled the "picturesque," naturalistic landscape. Olmsted would also have had the benefit of Calvert Vaux's British training as well as his own visits to such great English estates

as those designed by Humphry Repton and Capability Brown. It is thus not surprising, when he came to build the Park in the midst of these inherently picturesque landforms, that he should choose the Romantic English rather than the formal French mode. But what the new Park was to look like was, in Olmsted's mind, intimately connected with how it was to be used. Here there is no possibility of misunderstanding his intentions: Form and function would be united in a popular, democratic environment; a haven of repose, relaxation and *recreation* (his emphasis) for the masses of ordinary people who were trapped in the hot, sterile geometry of Manhattan's streetscapes. Thus, the broad meadows, shady groves and cooling brooks and ponds were as much prophylactic as aesthetic amenities. This dialectic, which is central to all Olmsted's landscapes, here and elsewhere, is the basis of their astonishing durability.

Ever since its completion, the Park has had its own constituency, including both those who wanted "to keep it as it always was" and those who wanted to "improve it." Though, even today, the Park retains most of its original physiognomy, it has been the focus of various groups proposing changes in its condition. These groups have always described themselves as "progressive" and their proposals as "improvements." But, in retrospect, these proposed interventions can be seen as having seldom been wise, even when they were well intentioned. Had they all been implemented, the Park would have long ago been obliterated altogether. Fortunately, the Park has also had the other sort of friends who stubbornly resisted any change in the Olmsted-Vaux fabric. Though they were often in the past denounced as reactionaries, they would today be seen as preservationists. In any case, an awkward and sometimes faltering equilibrium between these two sets of forces has preserved the balance of the Park for the comprehensive program described in this book. Given the fact that this huge rectangle of 150 city blocks is placed in the center of a solid gridiron street pattern, traffic inside, around and across the Park has been handled with notable felicity—all while still conserving the visual integrity of the Park landscape. A circumferential drive, screened from the city by grading and planting, surrounds the Park. It picks up and discharges vehic-

ular traffic onto the surrounding streets at 17 evenly spaced points around the perimeter. But even more remarkable are the submerged transverse roads that carry crosstown traffic unobtrusively *across* the Park. This anticipation of crosstown traffic, at a time when the developed city lay almost wholly to the south of the Park, is but another example of the prescience of the designers.

This plan for the restoration, conservation and management of a great historic park will be of great interest to the friends and users of Central Park. But it has a far wider significance, since it is a prototypical study on the curatorship of a *landscape*—almost certainly the first of its kind in the breadth of its conceptual approach. It regards this landscape not only in the obvious sense that it is populated by millions of plants and animals and used daily by millions of people but also in understanding that its very face is slowly but continually being altered by natural forces—growth and death of vegetation, erosion, frost creep, topsoil accumulation—ineluctable processes that cannot be halted but can only be guided by wise policies. As was never possible before, it summarizes the best in current knowledge of natural forces embodied in the fields of archaeology, botany, ecology, zoology. In much the same fashion, the plan analyzes the social and cultural forces that play upon the Park, tracing the ways in which these forces have changed and/or remained constant, and outlining what these changes imply for the future appearance of the Park.

No historic artifact as large and complex as New York's Central Park has ever been subjected to a more comprehensive program of research, analysis and design than that described in this volume. Now under way for over five years—long enough, in fact, for much of the conservation work it calls for to have been actually accomplished—this document is called a "restoration" plan. And so it is, but it must be understood in its broadest sense. For it deals with an old and very complex artifact (construction was started in 1857 and completed in 1876 on the 843 acres of land and water, every square foot of them man-modified) that has undergone continuous change—some of it slow and natural (like forest creep and vegetative growth and decay), some of it sudden and arbitrary (like the construction of

new buildings and the paving of parking lots). Thus, the Park could not be literally restored, like a Renaissance painting or a classic sculpture, even if that were desired. What this document really envisions is an *extended life* for a noble old organism, a policy of curatorship that will preserve for another century, at least, the dialectic of stasis and change that has kept it Manhattan's greatest amenity.

In this plan, historic, archival and archaeological research has been employed to plot the morphological development of the Park across time. Parallel studies in the demography of the Park's users—who visited it, when and why—have been made, to establish the changing size and composition of attendance. Data such as these are already being used to establish benchmarks against which all proposals for future modification or retrofit of Park facilities can be measured. They offer the objective basis on which to evaluate such commonly heard charges as those that the Park is too "aristocratic" for today's users or "too old-fashioned" to meet today's recreational requirements. These surveys show that, to the contrary, the motivation of current users is very much the same as it was a century ago: simple rest and relaxation. "Eighty percent of the Park's visitors use it for passive activities," this report points out, "most notably enjoying the presence of one another and simply relaxing." And far from being exclusive or elitist, it shows that demographically, attendance almost exactly parallels the city's ethnic composition—55 percent white, 20 percent black, 19 percent Hispanic and 6 percent Asian—and that they come from all over the borough.

The Park counts some 13 million individual visits every year in search of widely varying recreational facilities. Many of these Olmsted anticipated from the beginning, as the report points out:

There was skating on the Lake the year it was filled with water (1858); horseback riding started in that year too. Concerts (1859), boating (1861), lawn tennis (1863), school ball games (1865), skating and curling on the Conservatory Water (1869).

But other recreation is newer (baseball, softball, volleyball and tennis), and mass spectacles such as the Metropolitan Opera concerts. These have tended to stress the Park's fragile land-

scapes and must somehow be programmed in the future. Central Park is also the habitat for an astonishing range of wildlife—especially indigenous and migratory birds—for which it provides both food and shelter. These last are not always as optimal as the Audubon Society would like to see, because in this Park there are aesthetic as well as environmental norms to be met. These are sometimes contradictory: The best cover for nesting thrushes may well be brambles, fallen limbs and “weed” plants (ailanthus, wild cherry). But the best site for a family picnic will be an immaculate lawn under high open shade.

In an effort to balance the conflicting demands of the Park’s different types of users—birds and ball players, horseback riders and nature lovers, theatergoers and tennis buffs—the new plan analyzes them quantitatively and qualitatively, then tries to disperse them in time and space to minimize conflict. Thus some spectator sports may be transferred to other parks and playgrounds within the system, while events with large audiences—like the Metropolitan Opera summer performances—will be spaced across time to give the lawns time to recover. Then there is a general policy of making the north end of the Park both more attractive and more safe, thus lightening the wear and tear on the southern end of the landscape. The Park has had for several years a policy of requiring prepayment for cleanup costs after such massively successful events as the annual Puerto Rican Day celebration. By such a mix of plans and policies, the city administration hopes to serve the democratic constituency of the Park while preserving its historic and scenic integrity.

The plan itself is the product of the Office of the Central Park Administrator, a comparatively new type of agency in the New York City Parks Department. This office is, in turn, the outgrowth of a century’s experience, during which the Park was managed by the department as just one of the 1,543 units in the metropolitan system. Such an arrangement, though it might have appeared sensible from the standpoint of municipal management, regarded the Park as just another 843 acres of the department’s holdings. But the Park was never just an *ordinary* tract: Conceived as a unit and built in a single campaign, it was an unprece-

ented design that soon established a special identity around the world. Its very physical characteristics—its location in the heart of the greatest borough, its size and topographical variety, the international range of its visitors—all of these factors suggested that the Park required special house-keeping and maintenance. Yet this identity was increasingly compromised in recent decades as the Park was integrated into the system as a whole and compelled to share the steadily shrinking funds available to it. After decades of attrition, the decision was finally reached in 1980 to establish a special management unit for Central Park. Simultaneously, a private agency, the Central Park Conservancy, was established, whose task is to raise funds from private sources to amplify funding available through normal city budget channels.

Having recognized that the Park was indeed not “just another” unit in the municipal system but one with special cultural and physical characteristics, the new Administrator also recognized that it required special curatorial attention. Its management program frankly recognized this fact—a step not without its hazards, since it exposed the Administrator and Commissioner to charges of elitism—i.e., favoring one park with an undemocratically disproportionate share of the department’s resources. To avoid such charges, Central Park operates under two separate but complementary budgets, with funds raised by the Conservancy being applied to those problems of construction and maintenance that are special to the Park. These problems derive mostly from the Park’s age and historicity, as well as the intricacy and delicacy of much of its physical structure.

Some of the sections of the plan deal with the restoration of historic structures, like the 22 bridges that were a feature of the original Olmsted design. Others deal with the conservation of some very special miniature landscapes, such as the Ramble or the Promontory Bird Sanctuary. There are orthodox reconstructions of severely damaged structures, like the Dairy and Belvedere Castle. Both of these are projects of considerable magnitude which have already been completed and are now occupied by new activities—a Visitor Information Center and a Learning Center. Other equally important parts of the plan deal with

process—stonemasonry, rustic carpentry and conservation of bronze statuary; Dutch elm disease control; an ongoing graffiti-removal campaign; and rule enforcement by Park Rangers.

Many of the steps advocated in the plan have already been put into effect—remarkable in its own right, since so many published plans never get into effect at all. All of them are seen as part of an integrated process that, quite properly, regards preservation as the fourth dimension of restoration, i.e., capital investment in returning an historic landscape to its prime condition will be wasted unless it is matched by a simultaneous program of maintenance and repair.



Central Park at its prime (1898): a rich carpet of thick turf, well-tended shrubs and healthy trees reaching maturity. The scene is Pilgrim Hill, immediately south of the Conservatory Water.