Public parks, unlike profit-making theme parks and amusement parks, are normally the province of the municipal, state or federal government. Their day-to-day operations are generally supported by tax revenues or special tax assessments, and their capital improvements are paid for through bond issues. Better perhaps than almost any other country, the United States has built a rich mix of local, state and national parks that provide its citizens with wonderful scenery and a multitude of easily accessible recreational opportunities.

Overall, the administration of these parks is effective and their funding generally adequate. This is less apt to be true in our older cities, however. Municipal parks created in the last century or in the early years of this century as emblems of civic beauty and experiments in social reform have deteriorated as their surrounding neighborhoods have declined. Where there is little political will to reverse the general urban deterioration, such parks inevitably become ill-tended, unkempt and insecure. Shunned, they are abandoned to socially undesirable uses like drug sales or opportunistic robbery, and their increasing notoriety gives them an ever bleaker reputation until they become fearful places indeed. Invariably, the socially hostile environment of these parks is reflected in their lack of maintenance. Park workers become demoralized and administration becomes indifferent.

Such was the case in New York City during the 1970s. The city's once incomparable park system was on the skids, and this was nowhere more evident than in Central Park. If the nation's first and most famous municipal park could slip into irreversible decline, what hope might there be for other aging and deteriorating parks elsewhere? Opportunity, however, is often born of adversity. And, although hard to discern at the time, a happy confluence of circumstances was occurring during some of the darkest days in New York's history, as the city teetered on the verge of bankruptcy. In retrospect, the lesson learned from what happened is that necessity and the will to address it, or a dream and a vision to achieve it, is an important underlying factor in the creation of new institutional arrangements.

Formation of the Political Will to Meet a Manifest Need
By the mid-1970s, Central Park was viewed as too popular and too precious an urban resource to write off. While there was general agreement about this, there was little agreement on how to rescue the Park. Some suggested making it a state park; others, notably Senator Daniel Moynihan, proposed turning it over to the National Park Service. But Central Park was to be saved not by a higher governmental authority but rather by a grass-roots initiative supported by a sympathetic mayor.

The birth of the partnership between city government and the private sector represented by the Central Park Conservancy was a matter of luck and timing. Since 1974, a modest amount of private sector support for the Park had come from two citizens' groups formed to respond in provisional ways to the crisis. The Central Park Community Fund was providing money for some badly needed maintenance equipment, and the Central Park Task Force sponsored youth employment and school volunteer programs. Because there was considerable duplication of effort, the two organizations soon considered becoming one.

By 1979, the basic conditions for the formation of a working partnership between city government and the private sector were favorable. With the election of Mayor Edward I. Koch and the appointment as Parks Commissioner of first Gordon J. Davis (from 1978 to 1983) and then Henry J. Stern (the current commissioner), the necessary political conditions of mutual need and mutual respect existed to foster the public-private sector alliance that resulted in the formation of the Conservancy.

Role Definition and the Concept of the Park as a Cultural Institution
As long as the operation of parks was considered just another municipal service, there could be no public-private partnership. But a park can be viewed as being as rich as a library in opportunities for instruction, as well endowed as a museum with visual beauty, as emotionally uplifting as a symphony orchestra and as entertaining as theater. Such, after all, are the "cultural" qualities of Central Park and many other parks as well. Parks are continually vulnerable to encroachment by well-intentioned citizens and public officials seeking readily available open space for transportation improvements, new schools and medical facilities, and other cultural interests such as museums and zoos. A self-perpetuating board that holds Park interests as high as those of traditional civic, educational, cultural and social-service institutions is necessary to guard and maintain this interest over time.

In the case of Central Park, a necessary first step in creating the Conservancy was the acceptance of the Park as its original creators saw it—a scenic retreat, a peaceful space that would act as an antidote to urban stress. The next step was a commitment on the part of the Mayor that the city would not withdraw its support of Central Park in the face of private funding. Since Central Park did not have a separate budget at the time, it was necessary to review departmental records—payroll, work orders, purchasing and so forth—in order to find out what the city's actual manpower and dollar commitment to Central Park had been.

This was done in 1980, and the exercise provided a benchmark by which to set the government's future commitment.
A further declaration was obtained from the Mayor that the Park would continue to enjoy the same proportionate amount of the city's annual budget regardless of how much money was forthcoming from the private sector. Private philanthropy was construed as providing "the critical difference" between simply maintaining the Park and managing it as a first-class institution. Specifically, private philanthropy was assigned the task of accomplishing what could not be done with city funds.

**Leadership and Board Formation**

The choice of board chairman and a board of directors was critical. The chairman's personal prestige and commitment to the cause would influence the character and strength of the rest of the board and its ability to work alongside government. In the case of the Central Park Conservancy, the first chairman, William S. Beinecke, was appointed by the Mayor as one of three mayoral appointees to the board. Because of his standing in the New York corporate and philanthropic communities, Beinecke was able to recruit a board of distinguished individuals to serve as Conservancy trustees. Recently retired as chairman of the Sperry and Hutchinson Company, he had the time and energy to devote to this task.

The two prior Park assistance groups, the Central Park Community Fund and the Central Park Task Force, dissolved their boards, and three members of each organization were asked to join the new board. Respected corporate executives were also sought, as well as community leaders whose backgrounds reflected the Park's democratic nature and pluralistic usership. The Parks Commissioner and the Central Park Administrator were directly involved in soliciting and approving board appointments. In this fashion, the new organization was exceptional in that it was forged both from within and without city government. Still, it was legally no different from any other not-for-profit corporation within the meaning of sections 170(c)2 and 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954. It had six "inside" board trustees—the three mayoral appointees plus the Manhattan Borough President, the Parks Commissioner and the Central Park Administrator serving ex officio—and 30 self-elected trustees divided into three annual classes of three-year terms of service, all of whom had been selected with the concurrence of the officials with whom they would be working. The next step, therefore, was to set the organization in motion and begin practical operations.

**Staff Building and the Importance of Working from the Inside**

From an operational point of view, the Conservancy's partnership with the city was focused through the office of the Central Park Administrator. The Administrator is appointed by the Mayor and reports to the Parks Commissioner but is paid by the Conservancy. The Administrator thus serves at the pleasure of both the Conservancy board and the city. A member of the Parks Department administration with line authority over Central Park personnel, the Administrator is also the chief executive officer of the Conservancy. This unification of responsibility means that Conservancy staff and Parks Department staff function in concert. No matter how amicable the relationship between an outside group of Park supporters and Park officials may be, it can never be as truly effective as this integrated arrangement.

Staff building for Central Park's management and operations has been strategic, and its growth has been by stages. Programs conceived and launched on a large scale, particularly those developed by outside planners rather than by the people who will actually run them, are more failure-prone than those that start on a provisional, pilot basis and then grow. Accountability for funds spent and demonstration of results are important before subsequent funds are allocated. The Conservancy's success has been predicated on proving itself step by step as Park management was re-established in Central Park. Many of the innovative steps to re-institute good groundskeeping and maintenance have been started with private funding only to be subsequently taken over by the city as items in its parks budget. For instance, a grant from Bankers Trust in 1981 funded a graffiti-removal team and equipment; subsequently, anti-graffiti personnel and supplies were absorbed by the city. Because of its demonstrated success in Central Park, the program was subsequently expanded to Riverside and other New York City parks.

Much of the planning and design that have resulted in a commitment of both city and private funding for capital projects—including this management and restoration plan—have been initiated by the Conservancy. The Conservancy's budget and planning are carefully overseen by the Parks Commissioner as well as by the board. Its expenses are scrutinized by the audit and executive committees, and city budget officials and private donors provide further accountability.

The final forum for review is, of course, public opinion. Approval or disapproval of the Park's vast array of constituents reinforces or curbs managers in direct and indirect ways. Successful operation in such an intensely public, heavily and diversely used space depends to a considerable degree on politics and public relations.

**Image Building and the Importance of Working on the Outside**

The articulation and marketing of the cause of Park preservation and improved management are essential both for successful fund-raising and political support. Without a clearly defined shopping list of gift opportunities, well-intentioned philanthropists will frequently suggest gifts that do not really fit the organization's goals. And the support of political leaders will be lacking unless the organization's message is explicit, popular and reasonably well developed. "Development," a current euphemism for "fund-raising," really means the development of the cause and its support and growth through public relations.

Favorable media representation can be enormously beneficial to the organization. Newspaper stories and television coverage usually do not just happen where simple good deeds are concerned. Opportunities for publicity must be arranged and the press contacted. Controversies, when they occur, can be turned to public-relations assets if they are sensitively, forthrightly and courageously handled.
Fund-raising must be pursued systematically and professionally. Grant proposals and letters must be written, and personal calls on prospective donors made. A direct-mail campaign is a useful way to increase name recognition and build a family of regular contributors. Board involvement is important in building a network of private-sector support. An articulate, energetic and knowledgeable spokesperson for the cause is also a must. Political leaders and interested community groups need to be contacted frequently. Their friendship and support are very valuable. In the case of the Central Park Conservancy, its administrative staff, like the staff of its various programs, began on a small scale, worked experimentally and flexibly as it took on new organizational tasks, then grew slowly in response to clearly demonstrated need. Outside consultants were used in the beginning for a direct-mail campaign and for foundation solicitation; later these functions were moved in-house. A corporate campaign was organized through a committee of executives representing various sectors of New York City’s economy—banking, finance, retail, consumer products and so forth. “Cross-over” contacts based on personal and business friendships were, of course, welcomed. Because of its good leadership, systematic organization and conscientious tracking, the Conservancy’s annual corporate drive now brings the organization nearly $1 million for general support.

Staged events are a necessary means of creating organizational recognition and increasing the donor base. The Conservancy organizes two major annual events as well as several smaller ones to raise both money and Park-consciousness. The Frederick Law Olmsted Awards Luncheon, held in May, honors one or more notable Park benefactors. Besides this festive benefit, there are other, smaller benefits held upon suitable occasions such as the reopening of a restored facility like the Loeb Boathouse. “You Gotta Have Park” weekend in mid-May solicits the general public; brightly colored booths at Park entrances are manned by volunteers who request a $1 donation from each Park visitor, who in turn receives a large button bearing a YOU Gotta HAVE PARK emblem. The emblem, new each year, is the product of a design contest involving local graphics students.

Personal calls on potential large donors, tours, special presentations and various other kinds of education and entertainment relating to the organizational mission all help to extend and reinforce a network of friends and supporters.

Planning—A Process, Not a Product

The restoration and management plan in this book represents the best collective thinking of Central Park’s current managers. It is not sacrosanct, however. It represents a vision rooted in a particular time and culture. Good plans will necessarily be amended, altered and updated. While outside consultants have and will continue to contribute to the plan, its principal authors are the people who are charged with its implementation. This staff is continuing, at a finer level of detail, the analyses, recommendations and design development outlined in these pages. As they do so, their thinking will be shaped by new observations as well as by public opinion. In the process, some elements of the plan will change, and new management will undoubtedly bring in new ideas. It is hoped that this plan for Central Park’s management and restoration will grow and change but not be abandoned, that it will be a continually evolving springboard for action long into the future rather than a onetime prescription that provides only a limited and temporary cure.