Central Park in Winter. Hand-colored lithograph by Currier & Ives, c. 1870s.

FOREWORD

Central Park, the creation of a partnership between the visionary Frederick Law Olmsted and the architect Calvert Vaux, was the project that secured their high place in the history of architecture and urbanism. The triumphant outcome of that unprecedented commission, the first phase of which opened to the public in 1858, was widely publicized (including popular color lithographs by Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives that celebrated the seasonal pleasures of Central Park, from spring promenades and summer boating to autumn carriage rides and winter ice skating), and led to Olmsted and Vaux being asked to design several other urban oases—most notably Brooklyn's superb Prospect Park of 1865-1873. After they ended their collaboration, in 1872, Olmsted went on to become America's foremost landscape designer, and his large firm established modern standards for an old discipline that had never before been so thoroughly professionalized or so democratic in its public applications.

From Central Park onward, what had long been the exclusive privilege of a landowning aristocracy—open access to verdant acres that offered restorative contact with nature—became an amenity to be enjoyed by all city dwellers in common. Few accomplishments of the reform movements that arose during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries surpassed the social, physical, and psychological benefits provided by Olmsted and Vaux's revolutionary breakthrough, which has improved the daily lives of millions over the past 160 years.

Central Park is not just the greatest example of its kind in the United States but, more remarkably, the first. Readers of this book, which is filled with detailed architectural designs for structures in the park, will immediately grasp the essential nature of Vaux's contribution; Olmsted's is worth underscoring at the outset. The self-taught polymath was the Proteus of nineteenth-century American civic culture: pioneering practitioner of innovative scientific farming methods; cofounder of the still-extant political and literary magazine *The Nation*; author of the sharpest first-person account we have of life in the American South immediately before the Civil War;

reformer of military health care in the U.S. Army during that conflict; and champion of nature conservation policies that led to the creation of our National Park Service. The design of Central Park exemplified the characteristic that enabled Olmsted's mastery of so many diverse fields, which in computer science has been called "predictive vision," a term that perfectly describes his uncanny creative foresight. Unquestionably, an ability to project what a landscape design will look like in three dimensions at full maturity is a useful talent, but a rare one. (This is why the eighteenth-century British landscape designer Humphry Repton devised illustrated books that included foldout vistas with movable colored overlays to show "before" and "after" versions of his proposals and explain his ideas to patrons—a foretaste of the presentation boards with which Olmsted and Vaux persuaded the park's Board of Commissioners to adopt their Greensward plan of 1858 as the winning entry in the park's design competition.) Few laypeople can apprehend the outcome of such transformations, let alone fathom that Central Park, a seeming vestige of primeval nature somehow miraculously preserved, is a wholly manmade invention.

Before Olmsted died—at eighty-one, a great age in 1903—his certainty about how the Greensward plan would ultimately turn out was vindicated as its trees reached their full height after four decades and his naturalistic compositions took on an abundant appearance much like the Central Park we know today (rather than dotted with the feathery saplings depicted by Currier and Ives early on.) During that same timespan the population of Manhattan grew no less vigorously, from 813,000 in 1860 to 1,850,000 in 1900, a rise of more than a million inhabitants. What began as wasteland reclamation on the outer fringes of the populated city had by the end of the century turned into the proverbial green lungs of New York.

By the turn of the twentieth century Central Park was hemmed in on all four sides, much in the same way that Manhattan's postmillennial wonder, the High Line, has stimulated real estate development on its periphery. In both instances, although more than a century apart, ever-taller buildings formed a veritable palisade enclosing each park, as the city's economy prospered and apartment houses were erected to the maximum legal height in order to take advantage of a rare respite from increasing urban density.

Central Park's enduring hold on the public imagination is reflected in its recurrent presence in popular entertainment, and especially the movies of the Golden Age of Hollywood, which defined an idealized cultural landscape

for all Americans. There was *Gold Diggers* of 1933 (which featured "Pettin' in the Park," a bizarrely sexualized production number choreographed by Busby Berkeley) and *Born to Dance* (1936), in which James Stewart serenades Eleanor Powell with Cole Porter's haunting ballad "Easy to Love." Even more compelling was Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse's "Dancing in the Dark" sequence in *The Band Wagon* (1953), a pinnacle of midcentury dance. Often Central Park was portrayed as almost a character in itself, a place of pure romantic enchantment where a couple in love could find themselves together but alone at the very heart of our greatest metropolis.

These three musical numbers were all filmed at ground level, and indeed on studio sound stages rather than in the real thing. However, Central Park has been used as an on-site location for a long list of other films, from the silent *Romeo and Juliet* (1908), a treatment of the Shakespeare tragedy shot at the Bethesda Fountain, to *Hair* (1979), the "American Tribal Love-Rock Musical" (as it billed itself), which romped all over the park's 843-acre expanse. For me, though, the most affecting cinematic evocation of Central Park comes at the very end of *Swing Time* (1936), the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers vehicle that concludes at the top of a midtown Manhattan skyscraper overlooking Central Park. A trompel'oeil north-south view of Olmsted and Vaux's design displays several of its most distinctive features—the Drive, the Lake, the Sheep Meadow, the Transverses, and the Reservoir—clearly identifiable as contradictory snow and sunshine break out over the iconic contours of this Eden for Everyone, all to the strains of Jerome Kern's irresistible musical score.

A populist paradise was exactly what the creators of Central Park hoped it would become, as confirmed by the ravishing preparatory drawings for myriad elements of the scheme—from the comprehensive Greensward plan of 1858 to countless small grace notes with which the park was initially embellished—reproduced here more fully than ever before. Much praise has been accorded Olmsted and Vaux for how skillfully they organized the implementation of Central Park, but the heartfelt participation of many other dedicated artists is fully demonstrated in the illustrations on the following pages.

The finest of these ink-and-watercolor renderings rival the technical expertise of those being made contemporaneously by students at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, although Americans began to attend that venerable

academy in significant numbers only after the Civil War. This impressive visual evidence indicates that the prime movers behind Central Park considered the very best none too good for their fellow citizens, whatever their station in life, and no effort was to be stinted on their behalf. That these movers were all toiling on behalf of and through the institutions of government and politics—even Olmsted and Vaux were public employees—is testament to the efficacy of democratic rule in their day. In this regard, it seems appropriate that the original art reproduced in this book resides in New York City's Municipal Archives.

As Olmsted's detailed writings on the social implications of design emphasize, his belief in the uplifting power of public art was well justified, proven by how from the very beginning Central Park has acted as a veritable engine of urban acculturation. Without question it has succeeded in its supporters' aims beyond their fondest hopes or ability to imagine the city's ever-shifting demographic makeup more than a century and a half after this civic crown jewel first opened.

It is important to recall that in the decade that preceded the public movement to create Central Park, between a million and a million and a half foreign immigrants poured into New York. Today, when the very premise of immigration to the United States is being seriously challenged, Central Park proudly stands as our finest civic architectural tribute to the foundational American principles of equality and opportunity for all.

—Martin Filler

Central Park—The Bridge. Hand-colored lithograph by Currier & Ives, 1864–72.