

Irony in the Parks

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more and more by the idea that if space is open, someone should be doing something uproarious, or organized, in it. No serene expanse of trees or grass, or natural rocky refuge, is safe. Such "useless" areas are better asphalted over for a "constructive" community facility, a pretentious memorial statue, or another playing field. It is simply assumed that we are a city of group activity enthusiasts, regardless of age, taste or inclination. The fact is that there are a great many people who still like to sit under trees, and teach children their names—a passive rather than an active pleasure.

Certainly recreational programs are important. But it is just as important to preserve that special form of physical and spiritual refreshment—the basic, personal discourse with nature that is the priceless gift of our parks, and which we have almost forgotten how to enjoy. Most ironically of all, the Parks Department has been the first to forget.

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Strange are the ways of the city, and the actions of some of its agencies. But the Oscar for irony (or should it be a Moses) goes to the Department of Parks, which, in a "compromise" decision with neighborhood residents, has agreed not to cut down a dozen tall trees over a hundred years old in its renovation plans for Tompkins Square Park. To save the trees took nine months of negotiation with community groups, which strongly opposed the Parks Department's plans.

Instead of the trees, the park was to have a softball field with three-tier concrete bleachers. This was the second irony, for Tompkins Square, on the lower East Side, is a very old neighborhood, with many old people. The 130-year-old park is their outdoor living room—as parks should be—a sociable, green gathering place for sedentary entertainments.

The third irony is the attitude that dictated this plan—and that still seems to dominate many of the Parks Department's activities and proposals. The original concept of parks as necessary islands of repose and tranquil restoratives in an increasingly congested city is being replaced