Architecture: Up in Central Park Up in Central Park Well Meant Wrong-Headed
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Architecture

Up in Central Park

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT would have been nice if the current concern about encroachments in Central Park had started a little sooner. It is just about 80 years too late. Even now the belated conservation fever aroused by the project for the police station and stables is unmarked by proper evaluation of the factors involved. These factors are need or desirability firmly balanced against location, size, style, effect on the pastoral qualities of the park and sensitivity to its original philosophy and design.

In the case of the police station and stables, with the exception of the large game ring, the score adds up satisfactorily in its favor. But to say that an almost total lack of judgment and taste has consistently been the case in the history of park "improvements" is a small, sad understatement of the disastrous facts.

Anyone interested can stroll to the contested site just south of the 85th Street transverse. The approach is through an obstacle course of existing encroachments. If the stroller possesses a trained or innate sensitivity to the picturesque landscape school of the 19th century that was the Olmsted-Vaux park style and its priceless hallmark, he will instinctively cringe from metal and concrete intrusions and avert his eyes from blockbuster memorials.

Each one, of course, was proposed and built for the public good. Oh, public good—and that includes philanthropy, patriotism, art, culture, recreation and entertainment —what crimes against the park have been committed in thy name!

Let us suppose that you are taking this walk, and that you enter the park at Fifth Avenue and 80th Street. The path goes between an iron-fenced, asphalted play area on the left and a matching, but larger iron-fenced, asphalted parking lot for the Metropolitan Museum on the right. It takes a while to actually get into the park, with all that iron and asphalt, and the view is of a pastoral sea of cars, not exactly what Olmsted had in mind. Turn right, now, toward your objective.

You are passing the very plain and unedifying back of the Metropolitan Museum. There is no effort to impress with this rear view, in spite of the monumental classicism of the four-block Fifth Avenue front. This side is obviously meant to be added onto. The museum takes up almost 14 acres of park land and remains a discreet cultural threat to more of it. (Just where, within this complex, is that dispossessed Temple of Dendur supposed to go if New York gets it?) Olmsted recognized the error of putting the museum in the park shortly *(Continued on Page 29)*

Up in Central Park

Continued from Page 27

after the deed was done.

Since there is no greenery to the right, you turn to the left. The obelisk, added in 1881, is a quite properly Victorian picturesque accent. Not so the sterile banality of its "classically" concreted approach, which destroys the pastoral spirit for another few hundred yards. With mixed feelings, you cross the drive.

Ahead, is the Belvedere Lake. You may walk to its edge on a solid asphalt apron. Beyond is Belvedere Castle, an appropriately romantic landscape image nestling well into the rocks and sprouting weather instruments. Balancing it, with maximum incongruity, is a stark, green-painted mass with towering steel light standards, the Delacorte Shakespeare Theater.

Well Meant

Hold—as the Bard would say—do you not respect free drama on the highest artistic level? Yes, indeed, as we promised you, every greensward - destroying encroachment is well-meant and worthwhile. All it eliminates, permanently, is open green space for rich and poor, in a city where land is the rarest and most expensive of commodities. Only Scrooge would suggest that construction belongs elsewhere.

Eyes right, then, to block the sight of the all-too-solid theater. A looming Polish king prances on bronze horseback, set on an immense, rectangular granite podium. But there is still, flanking and forward, the 15-acre Great Lawn.

They are flat, minimally-landscaped acres, made of fill from subway excavations dumped into an old Croton reservoir in the 1930's. Less a lawn than an active sports area, wire goal fences are scattered across it. It is a playing field now, not a promenade or pastoral landscape, and like all such, it is useful and rather desolately scrubby.

At the 85th Street transverse end is a stand of trees to the west, and to the east, one of the park's most stolidly ugly play and recreation grounds, iron-fenced, naturally. The backs of shop buildings and the existing Vaux-housed police station on the transverse road terminate the view. This would be the site of the new police station and underground stables and training ring topped by a landscaped seven-foot rise, which, under the circumstances, might even qualify for that abused park term, improvement.

If you are still strolling, you might go north to a point where the wooded vista reveals the massive, jagged roofline of the Lasker pool. Built like a jazzed-up concrete bunker in a sylvan setting, this is an artistic anachronism in the service of social philanthropy, to put it mildly. If you go south, instead, there is the Wollman rink, which replaces a naturalistic arm of an Olmsted pond with brick, canned music, and man-made ice. Any pretense to sensibility in either design was lost, hands down, while Olmsted and Vaux whirled like dervishes in their graves. The results are pastoral sabotage, or parkicide.

Wrong-Headed

At the Mall, there is more wrong-headedness. A cold, classic bandshell permanently anchored in concrete destroys the Mall axis and is the substitute for the gilt-starred, ornate cast-iron bandstand by Jacob Wrey Mould that Olmsted and Vaux put among the trees. At the Lake, the replacement for the original rustic boathouse stands in immutable tiled - lavatory splendor. The successors to sylvan summerhouses and refreshment stands that were allowed to rot are asphalt-trimmed, drainpipe-decorated structures in a staunch brick outhouse style. About 18 acres of the original landscaping have been replaced by misguided memorial "playgrounds" in unsuitable styles. The Parks Department job of landscape architect was accidentally eliminated from the revised 1936 charter.

What all this adds up to is a splendid object lesson in how to destroy a park. The dictionary defines encroachment as advancement "beyond desirable or normal limits." In the absence of any clear understanding of what these limits are, what is probably needed is a handy desirable-and-normal-limit, or DNL quotient, to measure by.

It could be computed of factors of grass removed, planting not replaced and landscape features lost, multiplied by $200 a foot for free prime land and a deficit factor for design unsuitability and donors whose gifts fail to meet costs. This figure could be squared for automobiles and parking lots. Olmsted was not a mathematician, but he certainly would have approved.