

Test Case in Park Plans

Proposal for Washington Square Marks Triumph in Designing for Local Needs

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The acceptance of the local community's plans for Washington Square Park by the Mayor and Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris is more than just the end of another lively skirmish in the continuing battle between Greenwich Village and the Municipal Establishment. The approved plan has

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taken on the significance of a test case of park design in New York City, a subject that has been under consid-

erable fire for some time by such private citizen organizations as the Park Association and the Citizens Housing and Planning Council.

The specific issue has been the choice between a sensitively developed scheme to serve specific local needs, tastes and traditions and a standard design in a familiar academic style that the kinder critics have called tired and the community has called an outrage.

The standard design was set forth by the Parks Department as its rehabilitation scheme for the abused and shabby square. The plan that rebutted it was prepared by a committee of nine local architects working with Community Planning Board No. 2. These boards, which have become increasingly active in the last year, are resident groups that provide direct liaison with the Borough President's office and, indirectly, with the Planning Commission and city agencies.

Comparison of the two plans makes the design problem clear and illuminates the plight of the city's parks. The Parks Department proposal, prepared by an outside consultant, Gilmore Clarke, was a formal, axial design of a kind known to architects as "Beaux Arts." This is a French classic style inspired by the Beaux Arts architecture school in Paris, which was at the height of its prestige and influence at the turn of the century. Its disciples have been responsible for countless colonnaded comfort stations and monotonously look-alike parks of stiff, symmetrical pattern throughout the United States.

Rejected by Residents

Washington Square and other Village residents wanted none of it. They fought the proposal, charging that it was a hopelessly dated design representative of what they called the Parks Department's equally dated approach, and that it not only ignored their needs but also destroyed the basic character of the old park, which they hoped to preserve.

Essentially, the new plan is a rehabilitative one, restoring the familiar quirks and eccentricities that they know and like.

Instead of moving the off-center fountain in line with the arch, as called for in the Parks Department plan—a pointless and expensive procedure to all who do not consider axial symmetry the ultimate objective of landscape design—the local architects redesigned the area around the fountain with a sitting wall, decorative pavement and connecting podium to improve its popular social uses.

The whole concept is based on familiarity with the park and utilization of its existing features rather than the destruction of those features by the superposition of an alien and arbitrary design.

The question is, where does it go from here? The accepted

plan goes back to the Parks Department, which is short of money and manpower.

There is a budget of \$824,575 for the rehabilitation of Washington Square Park, although the architects estimate the new design might cost \$250,000 less than this. But under normal circumstances, if a project proved to be in excess of its allocation, or presented unfamiliar problems, it would be sheared by the department. What was not cut out in this way would then stand a fair chance of being slashed when reviewed by the budget director, who virtually controls the city's design destiny under the new City Charter.

The Bureau of the Budget has an eagle eye for "frills," which generally includes any overt indication of architectural quality.

In contrast, in a city such as Philadelphia, 1 per cent is added to every basic park budget for "beautification." Many experts feel that this 1 per cent makes Philadelphia's results 100 per cent better than New York's, because it emphasizes the creation of something attractive.

The Village backers hope that the Parks Department will execute the plan with its own staff, as a rehabilitation project, using the services of the local architects' committee that designed it. The group includes some of the city's most respected architects.

The Parks Department, however, is seriously understaffed. Salaries range from about \$4,550 to a top of \$12,000 for architects and engineers, and recruitment possibilities are poor. For outside design work the department pays 8 per cent—4 per cent for design, and 4 per cent for supervision—which is poor on the professional scale.

Its limited staff and funds are engaged in a constant, losing struggle with maintenance. Overwhelmed by maintenance, and under pressure from a backlog of work, its design solutions are processed for standardized care and have been strongly criticized as singularly lacking in originality, charm, or suitability to specific neighborhoods.

If community help is accepted from citizen groups, the Parks Department becomes officially responsible for any errors and must carry the burden of unsuccessful experiments. At the same time, its attitude toward change or improvement has become congealed in a mold of habit, convenience, lethargy and simple despair.

If precedent is followed in this case, certain features of the Washington Square plan will be put in as a sop to the community; others will be scuttled or standardized. But the results are being watched with considerable interest outside of New York.

Lewis Mumford, the critic who is usually concerned with more Olympian architectural affairs, commented on the plan, although he has not yet had a chance to make a thorough study of it. "I am in favor of the traditional uses of the park," he said. "Neighborhood sentiment must be considered."

In the case of Washington Square Park, both sentiment and standards are involved, and they are the crux of the city's park problem. To many New Yorkers, the plan has become a symbol of the need for change in a city with a die-hard indifference to design.