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Architecture

A Sense of Manhattan as Reflected in Landscape Design and Photography

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A LITTLE revisionist history is taking place at the Museum of the City of New York. A small display in the entrance hall called "Central Park's Calvert Vaux" reminds us that a considerable share of the credit for the park belongs to Frederick Law Olmsted's partner-in-design. Vaux's sesquicentennial is being marked this year by park and landscape architecture buffs.

The focus of a select handful of paintings and drawings on the subject is less the enlarged photograph of a benign and bespectacled Vaux than two remarkable documents, each one approximately 11-feet long. The first is a topographical survey by an engineer, Egbert C. Viele, of the pre-park design of the Central Park site in 1855. It is a desolate waste of rock outcroppings and squatters' huts with a few hog farms and some choice touches such as a bone-boiling plant and a swill mill. Mr. Viele had high hopes of designing the park himself.

Vaux, an architect who came from England to work with Andrew Jackson Downing, the man who literally put landscape architecture on the American map, had other ideas. He called for a competition and talked Olmsted into joining him in the preparation of a submission. The second 11-foot document is Greensward, the Olmsted-Vaux design that won them the job in 1858.

The juxtaposition of these two rare documents is fascinating, and worth the trip uptown. (They will be on view through November 24.) Nothing could indicate more clearly the art and artifice of Central Park than this kind of before-and-after ground plan. The park is a prime work of the 19th-century English romantic landscape taste, with its calculatedly informal drives, walks and vistas, and more formal promenades and fountains, all carefully subordinated to the planned "natural" features.

"The landscape is everything, the architecture nothing, till you get to the Terrace," Vaux pointed out. (He was, after all, an architect.) And he designed the Terrace, which climaxes the Mall promenade, as well as the park's other structures. Olmsted designed all the planting. But it is important to remember, as Henry Hope Reed, Jr. states in a pamphlet funded, with the show, by the Arthur Ross Foundation, that it is hard to tell where the work of one man leaves off and the other begins. The significant whole is the "nature" they created. It was a marriage, and a park, made in heaven.

Across town, at the New York Historical Society, there is another summer show about New York, this one sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. The exhibition, called "Manhattan Now" and subtitled "14 photographers look at the form of the city," has already been well reviewed and praised as both art and photography.

Very little has been said, however, of its intent—the revelation of the form of the city—an objective that the exhibition's organizer, Mary Black, has realized with a kind of alchemy. These are the pictures of New York that I have always wanted to see, or to know existed, somewhere except in my own mind's eye. This is a New York that would tear me apart if I were to see it far away from home. It is primarily an architectural New York, the city as stone and steel, but it is so much, much more.

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Here is the city's sense and presence, its joint physical and emotional message, through its structure and substance, in the telling details that counterpoint its overwhelming mass. As other reviewers have noted, the score as art, while uneven, is high. But the special New York sensibility—a particular prideful sense of place that non-New Yorkers rarely understand — is the constant theme.

The list of photographers

Andro Kertesz

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embraces both professionals and amateurs in a wide range of abilities: Robert Campbell, Adelaide de Menil, Sam Falk, Andreas Feininger, Mark Feldstein, Peter Fink, Edmund V. Gillon, Jr., Evelyn Hofer, Sidney Kerner, André Kertesz, Dimitri Kessel, Martin Leifer, Peter Marks and Rodman C. Rockefeller. What they all share is that remarkable sense of place.

In their work, the city sits for its formal portrait—the great vistas from the air, the skyline, and bridges—and its informal likeness in roofscapes, streets and historic survivals. Andreas Feininger's subjects reaffirm a singular vision of the city's masses and contrasts formidably organized and established for eternity. His view of Park Avenue to the Pan Am Building is totally perceived urbanism that makes other efforts look like architectural pedantry.

In contrast, Mark Feinstein offers a catalogue of extraordinary details — parts of walls, patterns of windows, doors and dormers, the texture of old paint and stone, the visual accident of fire escapes, a cast-iron column, a metal shutter, a storefront —all photographed from silent, empty streets with the tangible feel of Sunday morning sunlight.

Evelyn Hofer evokes the architectural rhythms of cast-iron and brownstone facades with definitive artistry. Sidney Kerner adds a mosaic of parts: stone-workers' heads in a tenement arch, the steel understructure of a bridge. Adelaide de Menil matter-of-factly records the city's fairy-tale skyscape: the top of the American Telephone and Telegraph Building as cloud-borne mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the surreal, spiky chateau-style crown of the 40 Wall Street tower. Sam Falk shows a dormered, doomed Peck Slip.

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And then the vision enlarges, to the official panoramas of Dimitri Kessel and the views of Manhattan from the air—the city caught at sunrise, doubled in gilded water, by Robert Campbell, an airplane pilot.

But it is in the work of André Kertesz that it all comes together. He possesses the city, and gives it back to us again with the special genius of those who have mastered all of the difficult, complex insights and responses that add up to recognition of the city's soul.

Kertesz's roof landscapes of chimneys, ventilators and water towers, sooty or snow-topped against skyscrapers, inhabited by a few New York birds or a woman tending plants in a window, his decaying piers and solitary pigeons, the big, anonymous buildings that somehow suggest all of the nuances of New York light and seasons, strike the inner eye and mind like a proclamation. These images go far beyond the abstract patterns that satisfy most photographers. They seek out and find the reality that is also the poetry of this town; they deal with the spirit that is the truth.

Except for some night views that get dangerously close, the show is almost without a cliché. More surprising (picture editors please take note) it is virtually without people. There are a few shadowed figures, but the avenues are empty except for cars. And there is no sociology, no shocking squalor or slums. The focus is on sheer physical substance; the vision is of the city exclusively and overwhelmingly as a built phenomenon.

And yet the city is all there. The viewer is alone with it in deserted streets or birdseye views, and this, too, is right, because the ultimate truth is the solitary nature of the relationship between the city and each one of us. New York is a city in which we are always alone. Real city fear is the lonely terror of self-discovery; real city hope is the promise of private fulfillment in a thousand small or spectacular ways. The inanimate details become the touchstones of existence and reality. They are all superbly, sensitively, here.