

Architecture

Horses, Anyone?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is unlikely that there could be a much better solution for a more controversial proposal than the prize-winning design for the police station and stables for Central Park released by the Parks Department yesterday. The winner, by Kelly and Gruzen, is marked by appropriateness and sensibility—qualities notably lack-

ing in park additions in recent years. It was selected from a closed competition limited to five of the city's leading architectural firms, which included Edward L. Barnes, Marcel Breuer and Associates, Phillip Johnson, and Whittlesey, Conklin and Rossant.

The project is a many-pronged dilemma. It involves major construction in the park, where the basic rule is to avoid construction at all. Still, there are extenuating explanations of one sort or another for all of the elements that the \$5.7 million, nine-acre plan would include.

The excellence of the design is not going to keep the proposal from being hotly debated as a park encroachment. Nor are there any easy answers to that question. For the real issue is not design or architecture, but changes in the city's parks.

The first principle, of course, is that there should be no changes, or if there are any, that they should be minimal, based on critical necessity or unarguable desirability. (The issue fogs already; how do you define necessity and desirability to everyone's satisfaction?) The correct premise for this principle is that New York's parks, and we are speaking specifically of Central Park in this case, are great historical works of 19th-century landscape art and must be preserved as such. The city has more than splendid green space in these Olmsted and Vaux masterpieces; it has a trust, and it knows this.

Do you, then, freeze the parks with a permanent, inviolable, hands-off policy? Yes, say some, traumatized by past violations. If so, what do you do about problems of crime, personal safety, mass use and modern needs and customs that are part of a 20th century the romantic Victorians could never have visualized in their wildest Christmas-pudding dreams?

The answer, of course, is obvious, and just as obviously fraught with peril. The park must be preserved, and at the same time it must be made to function in today's public terms; a neat trick, by any measurement. This inevitably means changes, and with

Continued on Page 28

Horses, Anyone?

Continued from Page 21

them, the danger of destruction. They may be policy and programming changes, rather than physical changes, as the current Parks Department activities schedule demonstrates. But it is not enough to leave the rustic birdwalks to the muggers and the birds.

The real answer is the exercise of judgment, that rarest pearl of human values. These decisions can only be resolved by the kind of judgment that is based on historical knowledge, esthetic sensibility, architectural taste, sociological insight, and an abiding love of the beauties that Olmsted wrought. Since this brand of judgment is not only rare, but necessarily subjective, the foggy issue becomes foggy still. And the controversies rage.

Nothing could be more controversial than the nine acres of change slated for the police station and stables just south of the 86th Street transverse. Conservationists blew the whistle on the project at the first announcement. Now that the design has been released, some have accepted it; others will continue to fight.

It seems essential to add up the score. Of that nine acres, 40 percent of the construction will be invisible, underground, topped with planting; a solution made possible by the natural slope of the land. The new police station will replace, not turf or greenery, but existing shop buildings and parking on the transverse edge. In scale and materials, it will harmonize with the old Vaux building next to it, which will be preserved.

Stables and services are all

below grade. Mounting corals are depressed. The one conspicuous element, around which conflict will inevitably center, is the outdoor riding ring, topping an indoor ring below it, which together, form a structure with a 30-foot rise. This is to be used both as a police horse training ring and for spectator games. Even this is sunk partly into the ground, with its sides camouflaged by grass-covered slopes and planting. There will be no public parking of any kind.

None of this replaces any of the park's picturesque features. The site is an area of flat fill, where the Lexington Avenue subway excavation was dumped into remnants of the Croton reservoir system. (An earlier change). Unlike the café proposed for the southeast corner of the park, it would destroy, no rustic delights.

The 22nd precinct police station is a necessity. The 22nd precinct is Central Park; the station house has always been there. The mounted police, dispossessed from the 94th Street Armory when it was demolished, are to be used more and more as park patrols, particularly above 96th Street. Therefore the police want to combine the mounted divisions with the local precinct. The question of whether this facility could have been put in the west side urban renewal area has never been fully aired or resolved.

The arguments snowball. If the mounted divisions are included, they need a training ring. By increasing the ring from 120 by 280 feet to 150 by 300 feet, multiple sports

use is possible. Appropriate entertainment areas form magnets in the center of the park; where people gather, it is safe. Pastoral simplicity is not so simple in these tension-wrought times.

If the arguments are accepted, it is apparent that proper design of the facilities is both critical and delicate. It is equally apparent that architecture is really not wanted at all. The prize went, not surprisingly, to the architects who came closest to eliminating architecture completely. What has not been built into or under the landscape, has been landscaped itself. Given the nature of the problem, this is an indication of superior architectural design, not of design by default. Plan and solution are excellent. But some perils remain.

The crucial final planting must be fully designed and budgeted, and this, of course, is the crux of the success of the scheme. Details of construction must be developed with maximum care.

It is significant that the architect members of the jury, Fred Bentel, William Breger, Lewis Davis, Paul Rudolph and M. Paul Friedberg, landscape architect, have volunteered to stay on the job as a kind of continuing review board. This is an important and sensitive enough project that Commissioner Hoving might well stay wedded to it, too, after he changes hats and jobs. It may need his Merlin the Magician touch to see it through without compromises, and anything less than full realization of its excellent potential would be the disaster that its opponents predict.