

New Era for Parks

Hoving and Young Appointees Hope to Scrap the Traditional and Try the New

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Young Turks have taken over the Arsenal in Central Park and mounted their first attack. At a news conference yesterday that was a lively cross between a three-ring circus and a call to arms, a full complement of youthful reformers stood at the side of Commissioner Thomas P. F. Hoving to declare a revolution in the Parks Department.

An Appraisal

Mr. Hoving's appointees, ranging in age from 24 to 34 and in responsibilities from total design supervision of departmental planning and construction to executive director of the office of cultural affairs, have all been active in the not inconsiderable opposition to Parks Department policies voiced in recent years through citizens' organizations and New York's intellectual underground.

Such groups are traditionally committed in this city to criticize, but seldom to serve. Now, in a quick switch from anti-Establishment to Establishment and to official political life, the insurgents are calling the shots.

The first exploded with considerable force and promise. At the Arsenal, the department's headquarters at 64th Street and Fifth Avenue the news conference's concentrated announcement of design projects—a refreshment kiosk competition, three small parks to be studied by three New York architectural schools and a departmental graphics program—was aimed at a variety of positive reforms.

Plans Are Comprehensive

No mere "beautification" kick, the program involves technological and budgetary innovations closely allied with the new design policy.

It will concentrate on breaking the cast-in-concrete mold of traditional Parks Department procedures and regulations to experiment with new materials and construction techniques that can be both cost-cutting and design-liberating. It will explore previously untouched resources in the esthetic and financial aspects of its proposals. And it signals an all-out attack on a kind of repetitive, conservative design associated with the Parks Department since the Depression days of the W.P.A. that critics have alternately called naive or neanderthal.

Esthetically, the new resources include competitions, the use of students in architecture schools for design studies and direct commissions to supplement a departmental design staff whose Civil Service members average up to 40 years on the job.

According to Arthur Rosenblatt, the 34-year-old architect who is the department's design consultant under an Urban America grant, "we want to find the talent that hasn't had a piece of the action and to flush it out of the big offices."

Financial Aid Sought

Significantly, a competition in the 1850's flushed the designer of Central Park, Frederick Law Olmstead, considered one of the great landscape architects of all time, who was responsible for much of the handsome 19th-century park legacy in the United States. It also found Calvert Vaux, one of the best of the Victorians, who created many of the park's rustic and revival style buildings that have either disappeared or are presently in ruins. The department plans a restoration program, as well.

Financially, the department hopes to turn increasingly to corporations and foundations as sponsors of new designs and underwriters of commissions and construction. Both sources were represented in the first projects; Horn & Hardart as sponsor and operator for the refreshment kiosk, and George Delacorte's Make New York Beautiful Foundation for the graphics fee.

Preliminary studies for the

graphics, exhibited at the conference, indicate that the signs and lettering still have a long way to go. At the moment, they are more cute than clear, with too much styliness and too little style.

The right combination of legibility—the primary requirement—and typographical finesse that creates a distinctive result is not easily developed. In the case of the Parks Department there is the additional design hurdle of finding a contemporary "house style" that will also be a suitable symbol for some century-old parks. The new regime wants to express the new spirit as well.

That spirit is best indicated by the fact that one of the three small parks just announced is being planned in collaboration with a redevelopment project called Metro North that represents the most progressive spirit in the city's urban renewal. The vest-pocket playground at 100th Street and the East River, to be developed by the architecture school of City College, will be part of a project undertaken by the east Harlem community with a remarkable degree of sophistication.

Re-Evaluation Under Way

All Parks Department projects are in the process of being re-evaluated. Some old ones, for example urgently needed school playgrounds, will go ahead. Others, such as riding stables for Central Park or major improvements in Mount Morris Park, are being re-designed. New projects will stress technical and esthetic innovations.

It has been a popular pastime in the last few years for New Yorkers interested in park and playground progress to tour Philadelphia's greenways and Boston's totlots. There are firm hopes at the Arsenal of reversing the trend. The new program promises the "opportunity for imagination, taste and creative design" that was one of the Lindsay administration's major campaign pledges.

"We're boiling up a creative pot," Commissioner Hoving said. "An indication of a new era, I hope."