ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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The Original Designs for Central Park

More than 50 of the original drawings for Central Park are being shown to the public for the first time at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street), where they will be on view through Jan. 18. This is a small gem of a show that should be seen by all architectural students and anyone who uses and enjoys Central Park.

Just for the drawings alone, the event is notable. The display comes at a time when drafting is being taught in the schools again and architectural drawings are being featured in commercial galleries. The delicacy, precision and perfection of this 19th-century draftsmanship, the expertise with which finely detailed ink and pencil line and pale watercolor washes are handled, make most of what is being done today seem clumsy and amateurish. Of course, these architect-renderers had something to draw — Gothic tracery for the ironmonger, carved stone birds and blossoms for the mason, intricate joinery for the carpenter, columns, fretwork, paving patterns, fountains, arbors, bridges and arcadian vistas.

But these drawings do a great deal more than reveal the park's physical features. They illustrate the 19th-century ideal of the urban park in a way to conclusively silence much of today's conjectural, abrasive debate about the designers' intentions and society's expectations. They also make it clear that art and function were not dealt with separately by the Victorians, as we have been led to believe. The curve of a trefoil and the spring of an arch were studied with equal, and related, care.

Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux won the competition for New York's Central Park in 1857, and the much-admired result led to over 700 parks, parkways and green spaces designed by Olmsted's firm and its successors for 170 communities across the country. The result is a unique heritage of American public landscape. For Central Park, Olmsted and Vaux and their talented assistants prepared more than a thousand design, presentation and working drawings, including plans, elevations, perspectives and full-scale details, in three decades of work.

This covered everything from landmark structures like the Boathouse, Belvedere Castle and Sheepfold to a three-level circulation pattern for people, horses and vehicles, and a complete underground drainage system. Plans devoted to the extent and location of subsurface ceramic pipe and catchment basins are beautifully executed in delicate colors.

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Drawings also indicate the placement of re-positioned boulders for the most picturesque arrangement of an artfully invented landscape. The highest points of land were crowned with pavilions and summerhouses to take advantage of carefully calculated views; the contrast of a rustic, enclosed Ramble with an open, sweeping Great Lawn was deliberately devised; lakes and waterways were created. All this was documented in drawings that delineate the entire range of the park's amenities.

There were, in fact, at least 1,400 of these drawings made and used for presentation, approval and construction

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Designs for Central Park

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of the park and its attractions from the late 1850's through the 70's. We know this, because the 50-odd examples on display are from a cache of 1,400 drawings discovered in 1973 by Henry Hope Reed, then curator of Central Park, where they had been stored and forgotten in an outbuilding of Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on the Lower East Side. They have since been placed in the architectural archives of Avery Library by the city, on permanent loan.

The Central Park drawings had not only disappeared, they had been water-soaked, attacked by mold and destroyed by vermin. Their conservation is now a high priority of the Frederick Law Olmsted Association, a not-for-profit corporation "dedicated to Olmstedian principles of park design, environmental conservation and urban planning," and deeply involved with the preservation of Olmsted records.

The president of the Association, William Alex, notes that the importance of the Central Park drawings is twofold. "They preserve an extraordinary heritage of design documentation for America's premier urban park," he points out, "and they are providing the original factual basis for the park's current restoration." This is the way it was, and the way it was meant to be, which matters enormously when you are dealing with a work of art.

That long overdue restoration is finally taking place with capital funds and government grants under the present Parks Administrator, Gordon Davis, and the Central Park Administrator, Betsy Barlow. The conservation of the damaged drawings is being assisted by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Central Park Community Fund, the Central Savings Bank, the Central Park Administrator's Office and other sources, with much more money needed. The Cooper-Hewitt display has been made possible by the Arthur Ross Foundation and installed by Dorothy Globus of the museum's staff.

Saving drawings like these is an incredibly complex task. The brittle, moldy paper must be placed in a dehumidification chamber with defungicidal chemicals for a period of weeks. Then the drawings are removed, blotted dry, cleaned, encased in mylar if they are to be handled as working drawings again, or stored in acid-free folders. Those that are in extremely bad condition will need special treatment.

Looking at the warm, fresh colors and impeccable images, one is not aware of these problems. Instead, the viewer is transported to a park where, according to a circa 1868 handbook, "elaborate cages for birds of rich plumage have been constructed, on stone pedestals, for their display during the summer months." The graceful, gilded cages were designed by one of the park's most able architects, Jacob Wrey Mould, in 1864, "to be fittingly interposed in the foliage of the English yew connecting the ornamental masonry of the Terrace with the regular lines of the Mall." There was also a choice of designs for swans' nests, including the notation that the swans, given to the park by the German city of Hamburg, preferred the second version.

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Neither art nor quality was spared in the park's creation. There is a drawing of a roof plan of a belvedere made for a slater's contract, of salmon and blue-gray polychrome stripes that must have been largely appreciated by the birds. Mould's full-scale details of the elaborate, foliate carving of the Terrace railings are suavely beautiful renderings of great decorative richness. Colored Minton tiles planned for the Terrace paving were not installed only because it had been found that gravel brought in by visitors' shoes was wearing away the facing of similar tilework in the corridors under the Terrace Bridge. (I remember being fascinated by the patterned pavement during a childhood of park roller skating.)

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One could go to the Sheepfold for a demonstration of sheep culture, stop at the Dairy for a refreshing drink after a healthful walk, take an hour's tour of the park's waterways in a silent electric boat, enjoy panoramic views and watch the birds and swans. Walking, horseback riding, ice skating and boating were the favored recreational activities, based on the appreciation of a landscape observed in motion or repose.

Obviously, it was not today's Central Park, where appreciation has given way to destruction. The birds and their cages wouldn't have lasted a week. The drawings make the changes terribly clear. ■