

Architecture

A New Leaf In the Parks

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE Parks Department has not abandoned its policy of keeping buildings out of Central Park with the announcement of its intention to build a new police station and stable just south of the 86th Street transverse. What it has demonstrated with this solution for police and public equestrian facilities is that it is possible to maintain a policy of reasonable non-encroachment without "freezing" the park and its resources, providing the recreational opportunities that the city needs while setting standards of suitable design. This is largely a matter of judgment, as a few illustrations make clear.

Take, for example, the new Terrace Café, midpark at 72d Street; an enchantment of leisurely and civilized social pleasures. It is installed, or rather, tastefully inserted, into an original architectural element of the park, the paved Bethesda Fountain esplanade, and it fits like a handsome glove.

Comparision with the abortive Hartford café argued in and out of the park's southeast corner for years and finally quashed, is instructive. That pretentiously formal

snack bar would have bulldozed a serene spot of rocks and greenery, where it is most necessary, to place the facility where it was least needed, bordering a congested avenue.

The Terrace Café, on the other hand, uproots nothing. It puts natural focus on one of the park's finest historical design features and it brings life, light and activity to the center of the park day and evening during good weather, increasing its use and safety for a considerable area around the café's periphery. It provides not only refreshment, but a refreshing rationale.

The same approach is being used for the police station and stables. The police are already there, and when the new station is built, the original Calvert Vaux building will be retained. The stables that will be added for police and private horses will be built largely where construction already exists, replacing shop buildings and a parking lot. Part of a lawn will be sacrificed to make possible a full-size spectator riding ring for horse shows, polo and the training of police horses, open to the public.

The judgment used here

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was that the expansion of the existing built-on area would make full recreational value possible and reinstate the usefulness of the park's elaborate system of bridle paths which otherwise will lie idle after the last private stable is demolished for West Side renewal.

Last, and far from least in this matter of park encroachment, is the effect of Parks Department design policy. Solomon-like wisdom may be necessary in deciding when and where the no-building rule should, or should not be broken, but design is the ultimate tool in making additions like the Terrace Café or the stables an asset, rather than a drain on the park's bucolic beauties.

In the case of the Police station and stables, five of the country's most illustrious architectural firms will compete to make the buildings a suitable part of their surroundings. These uncommon

competitors are Edward L. Barnes, Marcel Breuer and Assoc., Kelly and Gruzen, Philip Johnson, and Whittlesey, Conklin and Rossant. There are program stipulations like using the grade of the site to put facilities underground and emphasizing the natural values of the land.

In recent years, the park has been getting grossly unsuitable buildings. A design for the stables prepared by Eggers and Higgins under the previous administration and rejected by this one, is typical. These additions, more notable for solidity than sensibility, stylistically semi-modern, semi-colonial, semi-commercial or semi-Disney, have been dropped into gouged-out areas of routed greenery with all the delicacy of a small bomb.

Most conspicuously absent has been any sense of landscape architecture, that special branch of the art of environment that deals, in this case, with the sensitive synthesis of appropriate building

style and the character of the setting.

Quite aside from the fact that the Lasker pool has never opened, due to \$300,000 worth of engineering trouble, it did not need to be an oppressively jazzed-up military installation of saw-tooth trimmed concrete. Necessary facilities and unnecessary memorials need not have the effect of disaster areas tidied up with cement and then "designed" with a path on axis plus two steps up in front and down in back. Installations do not have to look like permanent wounds.

This city need not accept every misguided, intruding gift that inevitably is more expensive to the Parks Department than to the donor, since construction invariably exceeds the donation, and maintenance costs, unendowed, go on forever. The highly questionable Children's Farm to be built in Prospect Park and the Levy memorial for Riverside Park are cases in point.

Good intentions are not

criteria enough. Any proposed park facility must be subjected to stringent measurements of need, use, suitability, location with the least damage, cost and respectful design. Every inch of green comes first, and every structure that can serve just as well outside the park should be located on other ground. The over-all view of the park cannot be lost. The trees and grass, the natural vistas, the miraculously sylvan settings; these are the refreshment and salvation of the asphalted city soul.

The proof is demonstrated on any fine Sunday. With the current car ban and the new Parks Department program of roving entertainments (no brick bunkers needed), Central Park is a kind of "action" Tivoli, a pastoral festival without buildings, offering activity or repose, that pulls New Yorkers from all its borders like a lovely magnet. The philosophy is pleasure, and the policy is planning. If the Parks Department will forgive a pun, a new leaf has been turned.