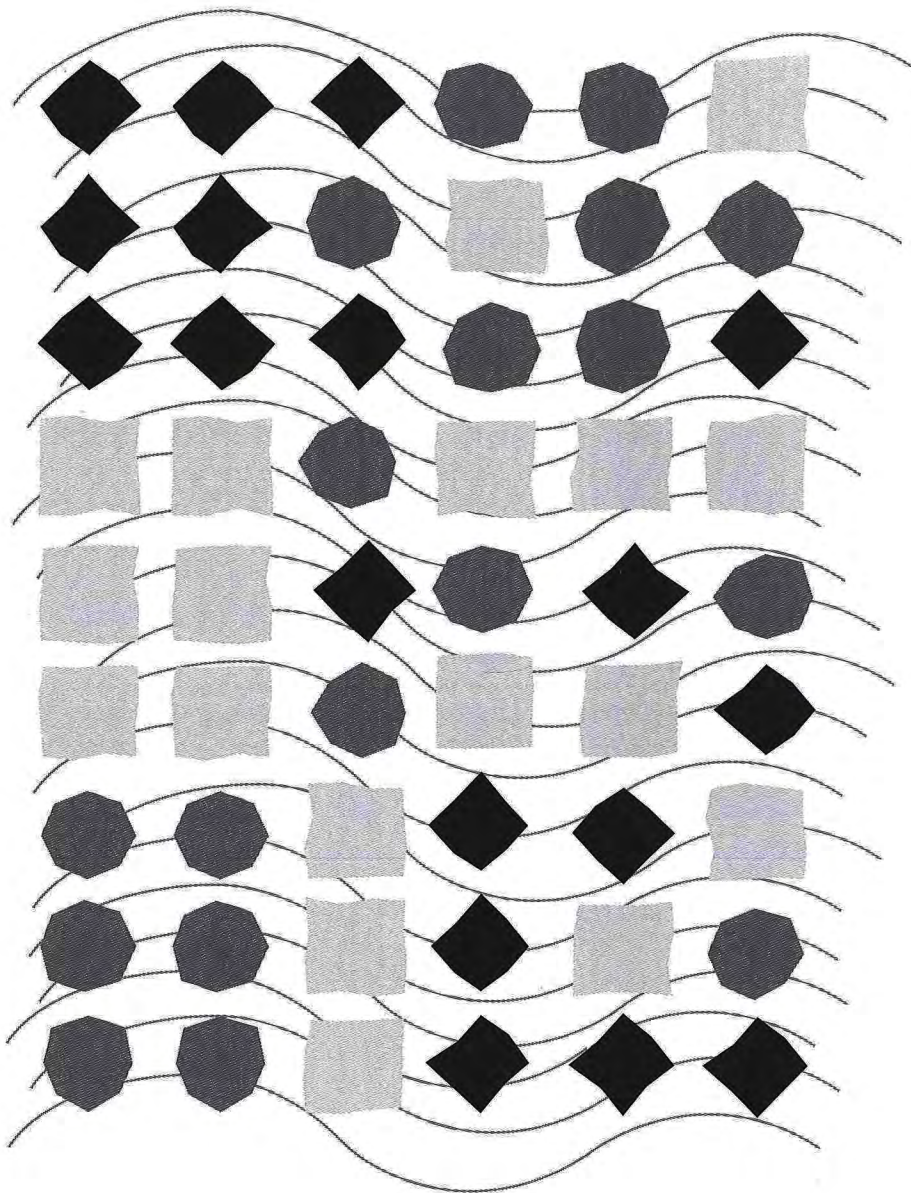


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1995
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BUILDING COALITIONS FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

Jay Farbstein and Richard Wener

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HARLEM MEER RESTORATION, New York, New York

SUMMARY OF SELECTION COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

Initial Reasons For Including This Project as a Finalist

- Central Park is a nationally prominent open space that had experienced decline. This project claims to have restored one of its most distressed areas.
- Because of its location in Harlem, the project may have important social significance.
- The Conservancy has created an innovative public-private partnership with the City Parks Department.
- Careful attention appears to have been paid to programming activities and to on-going maintenance and security.

Selection Committee Concerns and Questions

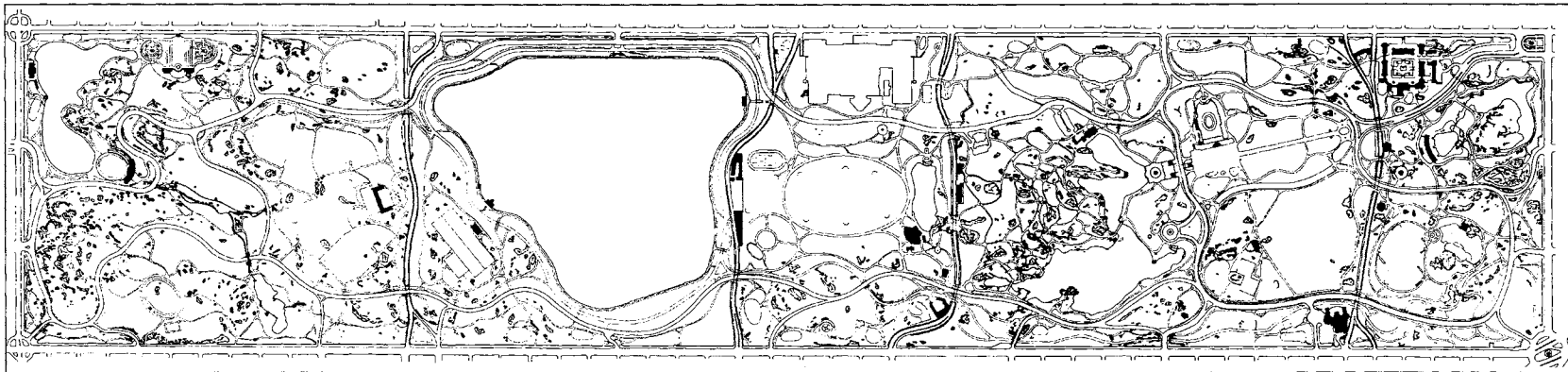
- Why and how was this area allowed to fall into disrepair? What happened to change the City's attitude and approach to it?
- How is the project area used? What is the balance between casual and programmed or organized activities?
- How are the programs funded and operated? Whom do they serve (including teachers and kids)?

- Is the area safe? Is anything done specifically to contribute to this?
- What impact has the project had on the surrounding area? Has the overall quality of life been affected? Who is being served? What has been the neighbors' reaction? What has been the impact on businesses — are they doing better? Have new ones started up? There are "partnership" housing projects in the area — has this project had an impact on them — do they rent up more easily?
- Why did the planned restaurant fail? Is there now a plan to make it happen?
- What has been the impact of the project on the balance of the park?
- Is there a sustainable maintenance plan? What is its budget, where does the money come from? Can it be threatened or taken away?

THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE

What It Is

- The restoration of 17 acres at the northeast corner of Central Park, including an 11 acre lake, and the construction of a discovery center.



Central Park (Meer is at Upper Left)

Who Made Submission

- The Central Park Conservancy — a private non-profit organization that administers the park in cooperation with the City and raises money to supplement City funds for capital projects and operations.

Major Goals

- To reclaim this part of Central Park.
- To draw local residents back to the park.
- To reintegrate the north and south parts of the park.
- To involve neighboring communities in planning and programming.
- To make the area safe and attractive.

Accomplishments

- The restoration and new construction are complete (with the exception of one playground — which was reopened in the Fall of 1995). The restaurant was deleted from the project due to lack of funding.
- The area is now attractive, active, and safe.

- Many people are drawn to the area for both informal and programmed activities. The Dana Center offers regular programs for families and youth. The schools in surrounding neighborhoods make extensive use of the Center and the Meer for teaching and hands-on research projects.
- An on-going maintenance program is in place and many volunteers contribute to maintenance and other programs.
- Users are ethnically diverse, suggesting that the renovation has succeeded in attracting both local residents and those from other parts of the city.

Issues That Could Affect Selection As Winner

- The project appears to have succeeded in meeting its goals of restoring the Meer, making it safe and attractive, and providing excellent programming.
- The City and the Conservancy have a unique partnership for funding, maintaining, and operating the park — this arrangement has already served as a model in other cities.
- The Conservancy was slow to institute a participation program, but they seem to have learned from past mistakes and to have embarked on a sincere and effective outreach and participation effort.

PROCESS

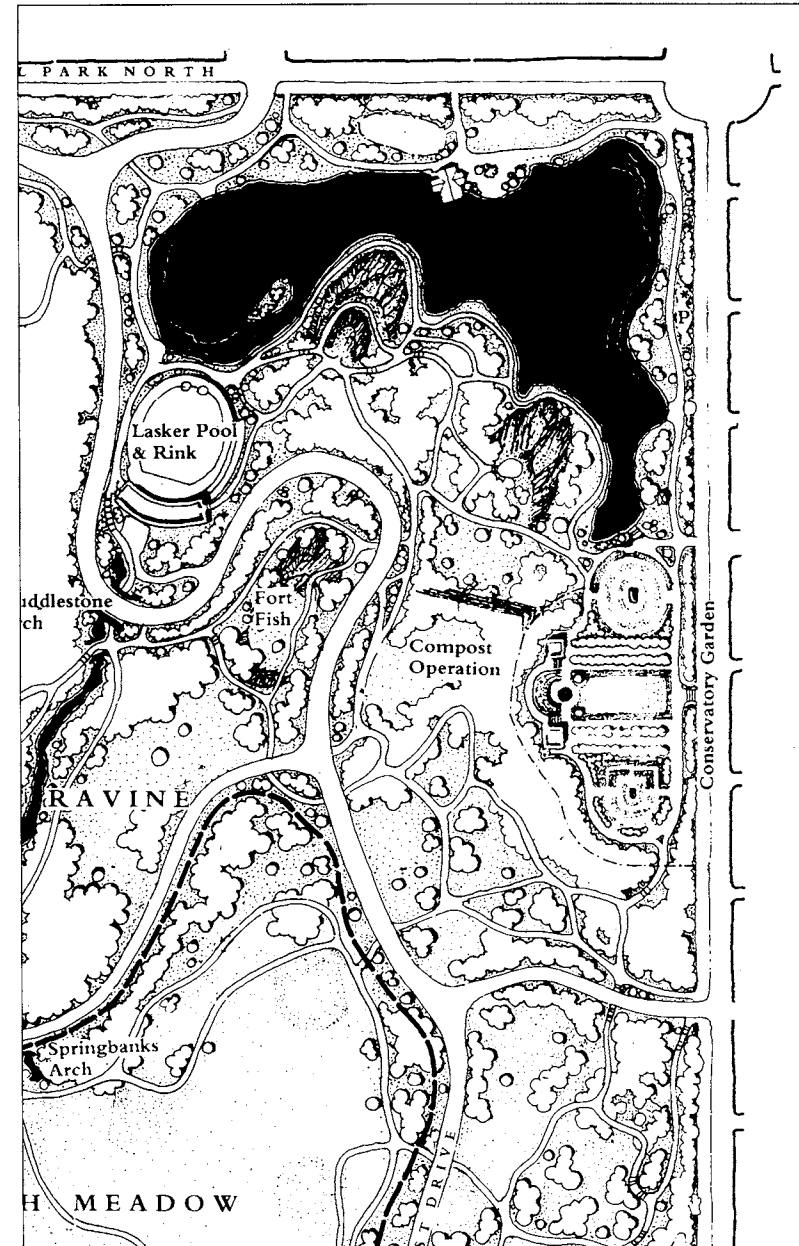
Chronology

- 1857. Olmsted and Vaux win the design competition for Central Park.
- 1863. The northernmost portion of the park which includes the Meer is acquired.
- Early 1900s. Many recreational uses and facilities are added to the park.
- 1941. The naturalized edge of the Meer is straightened and paved and a boathouse is constructed.
- 1966. Lasker Rink and Pool are added at the southwest edge of the Meer.
- 1970s. Drastic reduction in expenditures for maintenance; severe decline of the park.
- 1985. The Conservancy publishes *Rebuilding Central Park*, a comprehensive master plan for restoring and managing the park.
- April 1989. The Central Park Jogger is raped and beaten, focusing attention on security in the north end of the park.
- June 1989. Task Force on Use and Security is formed. Report issued in March 1990.
- October 1993. Dana Center opens.

Key Participants

(people we interviewed are indicated with an asterisk *)

- Central Park Conservancy (note that some of those listed here are employees of the City of New York Parks and Recreation Department):
 - Elizabeth Barlow Rogers*, Central Park Administrator (through 1995).
 - E. Timothy Marshall*, Vice President for Planning and Operations.





Olmsted



Vaux

- Erana Stennett*, Director of Government and Community Relations.
- Laura Starr*, Chief of Design. Patricia Cobb*, Senior Landscape Architect.
- Chris Nolan*, Chief of Construction.
- Marianne Cramer*, Chief of Planning.
- Cheryl Best*, Director of Education and Recreation.
- Sara Cedar Miller*, Park Photographer and Historian.
- Rowena Saunders*, Director of Volunteer Programs.
- Doug Blonsky*, Chief of Operations.

- Board of Trustees: Ira Millstein*, Chairman; Rev. Calvin Butts, III* (Abyssinian Baptist Church)
- Blue Ribbon Committee on Central Park Use and Security: Richard Davis*, Barbara Forgy* (Phase Piggy-Back Company); Lois Kennedy* (Central Park Precinct Community Council); Dr. Richard Lonnie Williams* (Boys Harbor).
- Upper Park Community Advisory Committee: Nan Davis*; Derek Gibbs*; Bettjean Miller*; Bill Perkins*; Bob Prudhomme*; Doris Rosenblum*, Belinda Saunders*; Dr. Richard Lonnie Williams*.
- City of New York Parks and Recreation Department
 - Henry Stern*, Commissioner.
 - Stephen Whitehouse, Director of Planning.
- Samuel White*, architect for Dana Center; partner in Buttrick, White and Burtis Architects.
- School representatives: Bob Giles*, Deputy Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Community School District 4; Carol Franken*, Science Coordinator, School District 4; Bob Wallace*, teacher at Harbor Academy.
- Captain William Bayer*, commander of the Central Park Police Precinct.
- Phil Aaron, Millennium Partnership, part of team that was to have built and operated the restaurant.
- Local residents (who were not part of the Conservancy): Leon Ellis* (owner of Emily's restaurant at 5th Avenue and 111th Street); Sara Jarvis* (114th Street); Bobbie Allen* (112th Street).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

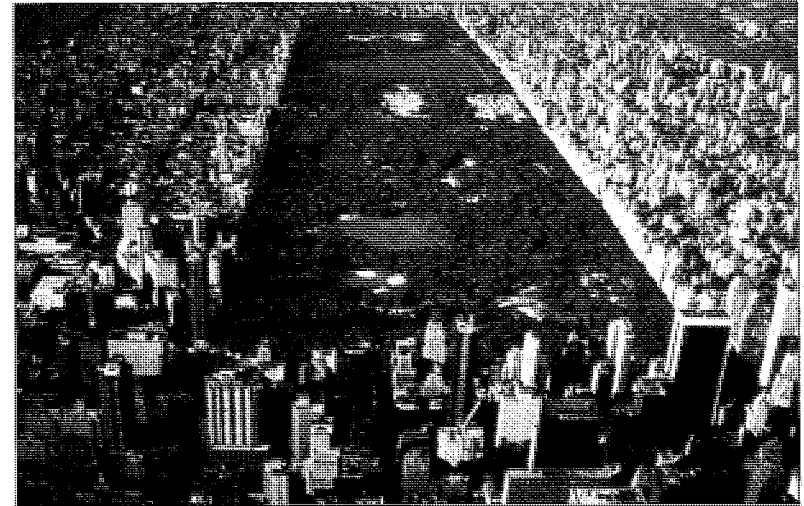
The Evolution of Central Park

With 843 acres in the heart of Manhattan, Central Park is one of the nation's preeminent public open spaces. Hosting 15 million visitors per year, it is the most visited park in the country. The Park's design is the result of a 1857 competition, won by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Planned over a backbone of natural geography and geology, the park is an entirely designed and artificial landscape. Thus, it projects a conceptualized naturalism, influenced by English romantic landscape design concepts of Humphrey Repton and Capability Brown. According to these principles, the park was meant to provide a naturalistic relief from the artificial city.

Olmsted and Vaux's so-called Greensward Plan included carefully organized vistas from meadows to woods, gurgling brooks and other water features, a circulation system featuring depressed transverse roadways spanned by arched bridges that separated park and city vehicular traffic — at that time, carriages — from pedestrians and horses, some facilities that supported activities, and very few formal features such as promenades.

Over the years the park evolved as attitudes and ideas about open space and its appropriate uses changed. Toward the end of the Nineteenth Century, the City Beautiful movement added a few Beaux Arts monuments to the park and the Reform Movement encouraged significant increases in recreational activities and facilities (skating, lawn tennis, baseball, croquet, football, basketball, and other games). Recreation became even more organized in the 1920s and during the tenure of Robert Moses as park commissioner (1934 to 1960) many elements such as skating rinks and the zoo were added.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the park became the site of hugely popular events — love-ins, concerts, anti-war demonstrations. While use grew and wear and tear increased in the 1970s, city budgets were severely curtailed. Gradually the park fell into decline as restrooms were closed, maintenance was deferred, and graffiti became widespread. Eventually much of the park was seriously deteriorated and, in many places (and at certain times), quite dan-



Central Park from the south

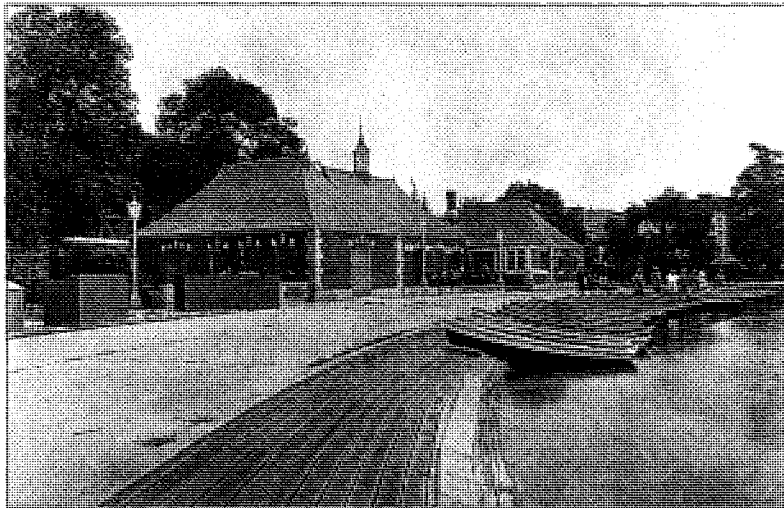
CPC

gerous. It was, however, designated as a historic site in 1974 and gained the protection of the Landmarks Commission. In 1978 (after prior layoffs of 800 park workers city wide), budgets began to be restored and planning for restoration began.

By this time "the condition of Central Park ... was truly shocking. Once-green lawns were bare dusty hardpan, slopes were gullied with erosion, and water bodies silted and choked with weedy vegetation. Broken benches and clogged catch basins lined every path. Years of graffiti scrawlings covered almost every available ... surface." (*Rebuilding Central Park*, page 6)

Leadership: Elizabeth Barlow Rogers

The Central Park Conservancy was founded by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers who had trained as a planner and was actively writing books about open space in New York, including *The Forests and Wetlands of New York City* and *Frederick Law Olmsted's New York*. Ms. Rogers was executive director of the Central Park Task Force and observed the Park Department's budget deteriorate as general city finances fell into disarray under the Lindsay administration and were taken over by the state during the Beame administration.



The Old Boathouse

CPC

Ms. Rogers was instrumental in obtaining grants from the Vincent Astor Foundation to fund a task force to study the park and from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a school program there. She worked with the Parks Department to found the Conservancy as a conduit for private funding and to establish the position of Central Park Administrator. The Conservancy funded the position and Ms. Rogers was appointed to it — a post she held for 16 years (Karen H. Putnam was appointed as her replacement in January 1996).

Under her leadership of the Conservancy, a board of trustees was established (principally to raise funds), the master plan was developed, and an organization was grown which not only plans, designs and constructs improvements, but also administers maintenance and programming for the park. It is a unique and strong leader who can succeed in such a wide variety of roles, as Ms. Rogers clearly has done. Two measures of her success are the high caliber of staff she has attracted and kept and the extremely high regard in which they (as well as civic and business leaders) hold her.

The Central Park Conservancy: A Unique Partnership with the City

The Central Park Conservancy is a private non-profit corporation that administers Central Park in partnership with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. The Conservancy was founded in 1980 by “civic and corporate leaders unwilling [to] accept the continued deterioration” of the park (quoted from Conservancy fund raising literature).

In what is essentially a joint venture arrangement with the City, the Conservancy provides the administrator and top executives who manage the park. This is a unique arrangement whereby many city staff work under Conservancy executives, though in practice the question of which organization is paying someone’s salary seems insignificant. Of the total park staff of 245, about two-thirds are from the Conservancy and one-third from the City (including some key managers as well as many maintenance staff). The Conservancy provides all horticultural workers.

The Conservancy also provides about two-thirds of the funding for park operations and maintenance (about \$8 million per year) and has contributed \$50 million for capital improvements. It extracted an agreement from the city that budgets for the park will not be cut disproportionately compared to other parks, though the city contribution could decrease as overall budgets and Parks Department budgets decline. On the other hand, the Parks Department is not constrained from cutting the budget for other parks and, if this were to happen, one could argue that Central Park had become a drain on the rest of the system (we were not told that this is presently the case).

Integration of Design, Construction, and Maintenance

For landscape construction and restoration, the Conservancy has an unusual and effective organization. All design, planting plans, construction and installation are done in-house (or, where construction is subcontracted, it is managed in-house). This not only gives the Conservancy a unique level of control over the intent and result, it allows integration, feedback and coordination among functions which are usually separate and often in conflict. It improves the quality of installations since plans are realistically



Elizabeth Barlow Rogers

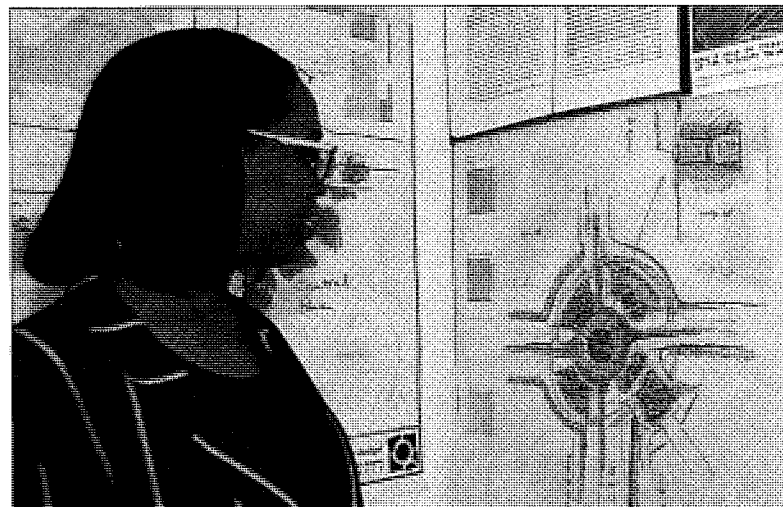
constructible and designers spend time in the field helping, for example, to place boulders where they are most esthetically pleasing.

In addition, the Conservancy now organizes maintenance so that it is handled by crews assigned to a single zone. This way, the crews learn about the area, get to know the needs of particular types of plants, become familiar with users and patterns of activity, and generally develop a sense of ownership in their area. Zone gardeners also participate in design and restoration decisions.

A Commitment to Maintenance

The Conservancy has demonstrated an understanding of the need for, and commitment to, providing outstanding maintenance of the park. Its initial master plan was called a "management and restoration" plan and the two efforts have proceeded in parallel.

The Conservancy spends about \$8 million each year maintaining the park as a whole and about \$650,000 on the Meer area (including operating the Dana Center). In particular, the Conservancy pays for all horticulture (plantings). Volunteers also contribute to pruning, cleanup, and planting through a program that requires them to be trained in these skills.



Erana Sennett

By appearances, the Conservancy's maintenance program is very successful, especially considering the level of use to which the park is subjected. The Conservancy has sought maintenance endowments for the park as a whole and for specific areas, though the Meer does not have one.

Restoration of the Park

The Harlem Meer project is a relatively small part of a massive undertaking: restoration and ongoing maintenance of the entire Central Park. The plan for rebuilding the park, published in 1985, laid out a fifteen year timetable of projects requiring tens of millions of dollars. The restoration of the Meer, which was originally scheduled for 1996 and 1997, depended on first improving the up-slope areas that drain into it in order to prevent further siltation. Part of the plan was to initially complete one project each in the south, middle and north. In the north, the Conservatory Garden, which lies immediately to the south of the Meer, was the first project, though it does not seem to have had much significance for the residents of Harlem — indeed, they may have seen this choice as continuing to ignore their needs. The fact that the garden is fenced sends a certain message of exclusion and may have

*Cleaning the Meer*

CPC

suggested that the northern portion of the park was being taken over by southern (read: downtown, white, middle class) influences.

As of the time of writing, approximately 50% of the restoration work has been completed and many projects are under construction. Another massive fundraising drive is underway and appears likely to raise the \$77 million needed to complete restoration and expand the Conservancy's endowment for programs and maintenance (in fact, the money was successfully raised). Much of the remaining work is on the west side of the park.

South and North: Toward Effective Integration of the Park

There are geological and historical reasons why the park was designed and equipped differently in the south and north. Manhattan developed first in the south and there were far more potential users living and working around the southerly end at the time the park was designed. The northerly end was still rural and agricultural — and Harlem was a village. Because there was more development toward the south, the original design provided more meadows, playfields and facilities at that end, while the north was intended to be a more natural landscape.

Beyond these historical factors, there is a modern social boundary at 96th Street. On the east, this marks the division between the poorer, predominantly Latino East Harlem to the north and the wealthy Upper East Side to the south. Due north of the park is Central Harlem, which is predominantly African-American. This division carried over to a significant degree into the park, with few park users from Harlem venturing to the southerly part of the park and few residents from the middle and south venturing north. The inclusion of new and restored attractions in the north and the improved integration of north-south circulation paths are part of a conscious strategy to encourage more exchange between north and south — with the goal that the entire park be perceived as belonging to the whole city. As reported below, that perceptual shift appears to be taking hold.

Rape of a Jogger

Almost everyone we interviewed brought up the highly publicized 1989 episode of a white female investment banker (known as the “Central Park Jogger”) who was savagely attacked and left for dead in the Ravine, only a few hundred yards south of the Meer. A group of African-American teenagers (some of whom lived in an apartment building opposite the northeast entrance to the park and the Meer) were convicted of the crime, which introduced the frightening term “wilding” to the nation’s vocabulary. Ironically, the rape occurred in a period in which crime had already been reduced significantly (see section below on Security).

In some ways, the event contributed to racial polarization. From the African-American perspective, it was asked why so much attention was paid to a black-on-white crime when many crimes with African-American victims had not been treated as particularly significant. From the white perspective, it reinforced the sense of the north end of the park as dangerous, threatening and perhaps to be left to minority users.

On the other hand, the crime can also be seen as sparking a general outrage about the state of the park and a sense that the entire city had to do something to take it back and make it safe. The response was to form a city-wide blue ribbon Task Force on Use and Security. In addition to police and park representatives, there were also leaders from community groups adjacent to the north end of the park.

The very name of the task force indicates a predisposition to consider the presence of people and activity as a critical component of creating a safe environment. The task force made over 50 recommendations, calling for greater attention to be paid to, and money spent at, the north end of the park; expanded activities; enhanced security of access routes; improved lighting; increased police and other staff presence; and the greater involvement of the surrounding community in planning and operations. Neighborhood residents and leaders who participated in the task force spoke of the very positive experience of working effectively with the police to solve commonly perceived problems. Importantly, the task force report led to formation of the advisory committee described in the next sections.

Learning About Outreach and Participation

While the Conservancy might be faulted for its limited commitment to community participation during its initial phases, it appears to have learned important lessons and changed its way of working. Of course, being a public-private entity operating a highly visible public park, the Conservancy always had to proceed through a formal review process. This included initial review and approval from Parks Department staff and commissioners, followed by the local Community Board of the area closest to that part of the park (this constituted the only real channel for neighborhood input — and did not necessarily provide a forum for local park users), then to the Landmarks Commission, and finally to the Arts Commission.

While utilizing this process, the Conservancy had two projects fail, at least in part because of a lack of understanding of community concerns and a lack of anticipation of their response. One in the mid-1980s involved varied interests among tennis players, while the other in 1988 and 1989 entailed community response to the proposed closing of a park entrance at West 88th Street. These failures led the Conservancy to hire a director of community relations and to conduct a detailed assessment of problems and options for improvement. Their analysis showed the two critical weaknesses to be a lack of input during the design phase (they had limited this to review of completed designs) and the reliance on the Community Board as the sole channel for park user input.



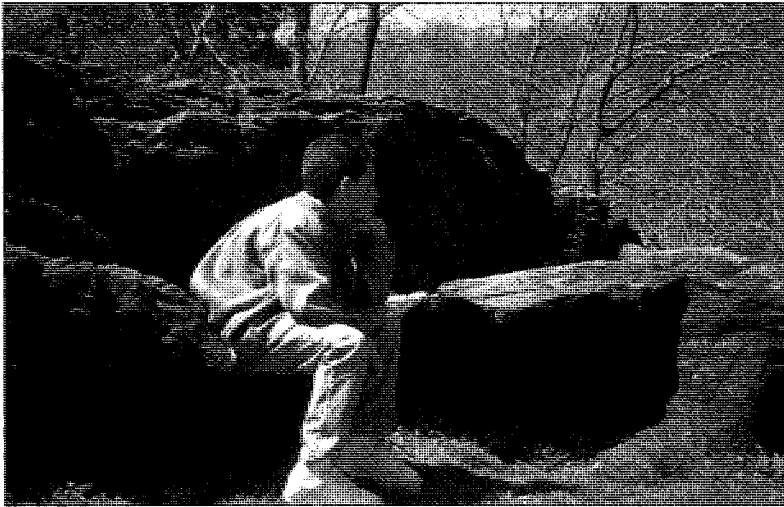
PHOTO BY SARA CEDAR MILLER, PARK PHOTOGRAPHER

While the Conservancy's initial response predated the jogger affair, they quickly became bound up with the issues it raised. The Conservancy embarked on a multi-pronged effort including improved community and press relations, as well as formation of a community advisory committee for the north end of the park.

Formation of the Upper Park Community Advisory Committee

The Conservancy's director of community relations began by establishing contacts with community leaders, groups and residents, eventually inviting a number of them to serve on a community advisory committee. Some had already been involved with the Use and Security study, but many others had not. Several members expressed an initial skepticism about how effective the committee would be, whether the Conservancy would listen to them and take them seriously, whether restoration would actually take place, and whether they would continue their involvement beyond a few meetings.

After initial activities getting to know the park and the Conservancy, the advisory committee was asked to provide input to various aspects of the Meer design, phasing, and programming. The restoration plan was already developed, but the committee



Overlooking the Meer

reviewed it and suggested changes in phasing, design features, and programs. An example is their suggestion, which was followed, that the 108th Street Playground be reconstructed first and that it be kept open while the balance of the area was closed during construction.

While the advisory committee was very active through completion of the renovation, its involvement has tapered off to the point where it meets only a few times a year. It expects to get more active again with the planning for Frederick Douglass Circle. This is a highly participatory process, where the Conservancy organized several events, including a design charrette with many community participants, some of whom were part of the advisory committee.

History and Decline of The Meer

(drawn from Rebuilding Central Park, page 56).

Before the city was developed, the site was the western edge of a large tidal marsh connected to the East River. This area was not originally part of Central Park, but the park was extended from 106th Street to 110th Street in 1858 (the site was actually acquired in 1863). The original design for this area included a formal canal and promenade but was changed to a lake with an informal edge. It

was called the Meer, the Dutch word for lake.

The Meer is the second largest body of water in the park and covers about 11 acres. Like other bodies of water in the park, its bottom was sealed with concrete in response to malaria scares, and in 1941 (under Robert Moses) the entire naturalistic shoreline was smoothed out and rimmed in concrete. Around this time, the entire Meer was fenced and a boathouse and two playgrounds were built. Though heavy handed in treatment of the landscape, these improvements reflected an acknowledgement that the neglected north end of the park required services that users of the southern end had long enjoyed.

In 1966, the Meer was altered again with construction of the Lasker Pool and Rink at the southwest corner directly over the mouth of a stream where it entered the lake, reducing its area by about 3 acres and interrupting the naturalistic flow into the lake. The rink has a low profile but its architecture is hard edged and incompatible with the original feel of the park.

At the time the restoration plan was written, in the mid-1980s the Meer was in very poor condition. The lake was in a "hypereutrophic" state and erosion was severe, resulting in an estimated 180,000 cubic feet of sediment at the bottom. While the 110th Street playground had been renovated, the boathouse was described as "a disgraceful eyesore: vandalized, week choked, burned out and virtually stripped to its shell." The landscape had lost much of its ground cover and there were almost no shrubs or understory trees along the perimeter wall.

The Meer Restoration Project

While the original restoration plan called for reconstruction of the boathouse, this was changed to incorporate the discovery center and a restaurant (see next sections). The principal work on the site included restoring the lake and landscape, rebuilding paths and a playground, and providing lighting and signage.

The lake was dredged of 20,000 cubic yards of silt, its clay lining was replaced, and an aeration system installed. The lake was then restocked with thousands of fish. Almost all of the lake's edge was restored to a naturalistic state, with turf, rocks or sand meeting the water. The landscape on upland slopes and in higher use areas was

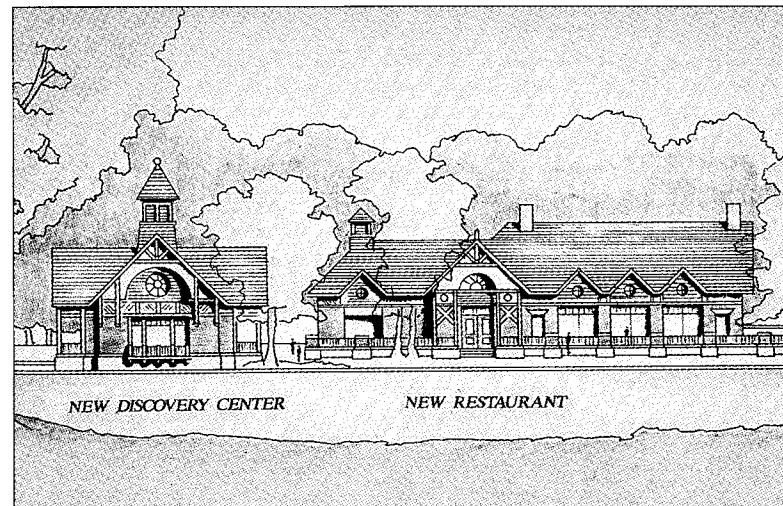


The Dana Discovery Center

restored and a major planting program begun. Only about one-quarter of the budget for plant material was expended initially, allowing the gardeners to observe how various plants perform and leaving generous funds to add and replace plants over the next few years.

As in other parts of the park, paths were revamped to reflect “desire lines” (where people actually want to go) and to eliminate redundant paths. Seating has been added, both as benches and less formally as planter edges and steps. Lighting has been reworked and improved, with a newly designed but historical looking light fixture. A signage program has been initiated, but not fully implemented. The directional signs are very small and placed perhaps too subtly on the lamp posts.

One of the two playgrounds (at 5th Avenue and 108th Street) was entirely redone, with attention paid to user needs. Parents were involved in the programming and design; they suggested, for example, that only one entry be provided so that they could better supervise their small children. New equipment, seating and fencing were installed. The other playground (along 110th Street) has not yet been redone and was enclosed by chain link fence at the



The Center and The Restaurant (not built)

time of our visit. It has equipment from the 1960s which appears to be intended for use by an older age group. We were told that it would reopen in the summer of 1995 (and it did).

A plaza was created in front of the Dana Center with hardscape, planters, and steps edging the lake. It is used informally and for school and Dana Center activities.

The Dana Discovery Center: Design

The Charles A. Dana Discovery Center is a structure of about 5,000 square feet which provides space for exhibits, offices, a classroom, and public restrooms. An information desk is staffed by volunteers and provides a place from which to check out fishing poles.

The exhibit area contains a set of self-guided, exploratory displays about the lake and woodland ecology. The number of visitors was observed to be highly variable over time. The classroom contains some scientific equipment and is used by school groups and for organized programs mounted by the Center.

Restrooms are accessible from the outside and are supposed to be unlocked when the Center is open. We observed, however, that



Inside the Dana Center

they were locked at some times when the Center was open (and the Center now issues a key to people who wish to use it). They are constructed with security in mind (stainless steel fixtures) and appeared to have remained in good condition.

The design of the Center was treated with considerable care and thought by the architects. The building is carefully sited at water's edge and has two balconies which overhang the lake. It is strategically placed to present itself attractively from several directions and is very easy to identify from the closest park entrances. The style is intended to be reminiscent of the Victorian period in which the park was built and the structure succeeds at this while still being recognizable as a contemporary building. Quality materials (stone, brick, and slate roof tiles) are used and the choice of colors appropriately balances subtlety and stimulation. The brick is carefully detailed, especially on the otherwise rather blank façade facing the street. Security is present but rather subtle, relying principally on shutters which are either hidden or look like an historical element when open, but enclose all windows and doors when shut.

The Dana Discovery Center: Programs

There is a wide variety of programs that operate in the Dana Center, at the lake, and in the surrounding woods. The Center itself is home to a self-guided discovery program about lake and woodland ecology, a very popular catch-and-release fishing program (poles, bait and instruction are provided at no cost; over 11,000 people participated last year), and more structured educational and cultural programs in its classroom.

In the year ended in October 1994, 174 school groups visited the Dana Center to see an exhibit and 2,948 people participated in 115 family workshops.

In April 1995, there were two or three family or individual programs offered there on each weekend day, bird watching reports were gathered each Saturday, and school groups came for instructional programs most week days. The Conservancy has an education staff which organizes and offers programs, coordinates with the schools, develops instructional materials, and trains teachers about the park and how to use its resources. We observed two classes using teaching materials; one was a design awareness exercise that used the Dana Center as its focus and the other concerned identifying species of birds.

On a continuing basis, a group of classes from 15 local elementary and middle schools use the Center and the Meer for an exceptional, hands-on science project. Classes are engaged in visiting the Meer every day and gathering data which provide a base for monitoring its ecological health. Students record data on such topics as water temperature, acidity, clarity, plant and animal communities, shading, and so forth. Data are logged, entered into a specially developed computer program, and made available through an online system networked to the other schools and the Conservancy. Classes dialogue by e-mail on topics and issues around their discoveries and share with the Conservancy scientists who also gather and share data with the schools. This is a remarkable example of giving children an opportunity to do meaningful research in the real world and it has arisen as a direct result of the Meer restoration in combination with Conservancy support.

In addition, the Conservancy recently received a major grant from the Lila Wallace Readers' Digest Foundation to expand and improve programs, including those at the Dana Center.

Construction and Operating Budgets

The cost of the work at the Meer was as follows:

ITEM	COST	PAID BY
Planning and Design	\$1,000,000	Conservancy
Dredging and Restoration of Meer	1,900,000	City
Shoreline Restoration	3,300,000	City
Dana Center	1,800,000	Conservancy
Plaza	1,500,000	Conservancy
Playground at 108th Street	300,000	Conservancy
Total	\$9,800,000	

Thus, the City's and Conservancy's contributions to capital costs were approximately \$5 million each. The area's operating budget is about \$650,000 per year including maintenance, planting, programs and park security (the portion provided by the police is not included because it is not available as a separate line item).

The Case of the Missing Restaurant

As mentioned above, a restaurant was planned for inclusion in this project, but was not constructed due to lack of funding. The concept, which evolved over time, was that a rather large facility should be provided which would include counter service (for snacks and casual meals), a sit-down table service area, and a large catering hall for special events such as weddings. The entire facility was seen as filling an important need in the community, especially the later two elements which were perceived as missing from this part of Harlem. In addition, food service was considered to be very important as an attraction to users from the south of the park, which is better served with these facilities.

The City issued a request for proposals for teams of developers and operators who would finance, construct and run the facility. A joint venture was selected that included Harlem and Midtown companies with considerable experience and resources. The selected team requested several changes in the program, principally enlarging the restaurant to a size they felt would be economically viable. The



Dana Center Programs

building was designed to match the Dana Center in style and was placed along the 110th Street wall with good views of the Meer and entrances directly from the street as well as from the park.

Unfortunately, the timing on the project coincided with severe setbacks in the financial and real estate markets. The developers claimed that they could not obtain financing for the project and essentially abandoned it.

Since the restaurant was not to be forthcoming, the Conservancy resurrected a concession building at 5th Avenue toward the southern edge of the Meer. There are push carts authorized to operate in the area, but it was apparently too early in the season for us to see them on our visit. Private enterprise has also stepped in to open a pleasant restaurant across from the park entry at 5th Avenue and 111th Street (Emily's) and its owner strongly supports the park improvements.

The lack of the park restaurant is perceived in a variety of ways. Some residents feel that it is sorely missed (especially the catering hall). Others feel that the Meer is successful without the restaurant, that it is attracting many users as it is, and that food service alternatives in and out of the park are sufficient. The Conservancy claims

*Fishing*

PHOTO BY SARA CEDAR MILLER, PARK PHOTOGRAPHER

that it is still pursuing the project and is considering an arrangement under which it would provide a building structure using private donations, greatly reducing the capital that an operator would need to raise. To date, no donor has been found, though several names were mentioned as having been approached.

Security — Yesterday and Today

The area around the Meer and, indeed, the entire park, are now perceived by users and law enforcement officials as safe and accessible. There appears to be very good coordination between the police (who have a dedicated precinct for the park) and the Conservancy. The police demonstrate a continual presence and have shifted to a more community-oriented policing strategy (with officers on foot, bicycle and scooters rather than inside cars); they have also located call boxes at strategic points. In the Meer area, there are five officers and one sergeant assigned, more than for other similarly sized parts of the park, reflecting the police commitment to keeping the area safe together with their assessment that the area requires a heightened presence. Police expressed their intent to be responsive to the Conservancy's stated needs and to keep the area around the Dana Center "safe and graffiti-free".

Police also recommended planting and pruning schemes which remove hiding places from the edges of pathways — and the Conservancy follows these guidelines. The Task Force on Use and Security reported that the park was significantly safer in 1989 than it had been in 1982 and the commander of the park precinct reported further significant declines in crime in the last two years.

Many people we interviewed referred to the interdependence of safety with activity and having people in the park. Clearly this is a circular relationship with many people abandoning the park when it was perceived as unsafe. That they are now drawn back into the park is both a product and cause of its being safer. The challenge was, as parts of the park were restored, to get the initial users to come back in. Here, programming was the key to the strategy's success. Residents described an evolution — some more adventurous ones tested the waters at first and use grew as positive reports spread by word of mouth.

Residents also report that the police are responsive to their complaints and requests — and it is clear that they see this as better service than they have generally come to expect.

Impact on Residents and the Neighborhood

Almost all of the neighbors and community leaders we talked to were extremely positive about the restoration and its impact on the area. While some had used the area during its period of decline, all reported increased use since restoration. One resident regularly takes walks around the lake and likes to sit and watch birds. She described the area as "serene" and expressed that it "helps to relieve the stress of living in an urban area." She also appreciated the fact that the Dana Center's programs help attract people of varied ethnic backgrounds (including whites who had not been visiting the area) and gives them a chance to get to know each other.

Another Harlem resident who had grown up there but used the southern end of the park was delighted that his children could use the park near their home.

Several area residents described the park as their "backyard", saying that it had been abused, become unsightly, malodorous, and dangerous. Now they see the birds coming back and neighbors who never used the park before out walking and jogging around

the lake, teenagers engaging in constructive behavior, and other positive signs. Other residents report a “huge increase in use”, citing school groups and fishing parties.

The process was seen as important, too. The Conservancy had been seen as irrelevant in terms of contributing to the solution of Harlem’s problems and its initiation of a community advisory committee was viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism — at least a “wait and see” attitude. People had observed the north end of the park getting worse and doubted that anything positive would happen. Even as restoration work began, the community saw gates being locked and fences erected that closed off the park and playgrounds. They wondered whether the gates would be reopened when work was complete. They also had to be shown that the Conservancy would take their input seriously — which it demonstrated in terms of accelerating work on the playground and creating means to keep it open during reconstruction. It also has won acceptance by following through on promised programs and maintenance.

Lonnie Williams of Boys Harbor (a member of the Task Force on Use and Security and the Upper Park advisory committee) described how the improved safety has made the park more accessible to younger children.

Only one person (someone we stopped at random) complained about the restoration in terms of possible gentrification on 110th street where rents were said to have risen and prior tenants replaced by those who could pay more. Other residents, including one who lives on 110th Street did not agree; she reported using the Tenant Interim Leasing program (a prior Bruner Award winner) to rehab her building while keeping most of the existing tenants in place as new owners.

“Up in Central Park”

During our site visit (on April 15, 1995), the New York Times published an editorial titled “Up in Central Park” (did they know we were there?). Speaking of the Meer and the Conservatory Garden, it states, in part:



Storytelling

PHOTO BY SARA CEDAR MILLER, PARK PHOTOGRAPHER

“More recently, Harlem Meer was derelict, a wasteland of broken lights and broken benches. A marriage of public and private money is what revived them, that and the enthusiasm of the communities at the park’s northern border. ‘I live in that building right over there,’ a visitor to the Meer said last spring, ‘and believe me, I’m keeping an eye on this place.’

“So she should. So everyone should, on all the city. If New York is to enter the 21st century with the same vitality with which it entered the 20th, it will be because thousands upon thousands of New Yorkers, rich, poor and in between, kept their eyes on the place. There is the uptown end of Central Park to show what happens when they do.”

THEMES AND LESSONS

Public-Private Partnership

Started in 1980, this is an early example of a private, non-profit organization established to supplement the efforts of a government entity. While some might argue that it is the City’s appropriate duty to utilize its funds to maintain its parks, the magnitude of degeneration of the park probably could not have been remedied by the city — at least for a very long time.



Ecology Program

PHOTO BY SARA CEDAR MILLER, PARK PHOTOGRAPHER

The structure of the partnership is also unusual; and perhaps better described as a joint venture where the park is owned by the City but mostly administered by the Conservancy who directs a mixture of their own and city staff.

Aspects of this partnership are, apparently, being emulated in other cities (e.g., Louisville, Kentucky). However, one wonders about the availability of private donations in a city without New York's access to both huge corporations and old money families.

It's Never Too Late for Real Community Participation

Central Park is a unique place and its community of interest is large and varied. From its start the Conservancy worked with many constituencies, but it may have ignored the less organized and less powerful groups of users and neighbors. What is particularly impressive is that the Conservancy recognized this issue and responded to it in a genuine way, incorporating real participation as a standard part of its operations.

Nature is Important in the City

Many people spoke to us of the physical and spiritual importance of being able to experience the quiet and scenic beauty provided by

the park's natural vistas. Especially in a large city, the ability to get away, to recreate, and to participate in nature are important in relaxing, reducing stress, and enriching one's life.

Reclaiming "Lost" Areas is Even More Important

With crime and the rhetoric around it dominating so much public dialogue, an area which has been "turned around" and reclaimed from criminal elements creates hope and optimism. The upper end of the park, including the Meer, has been transformed from a place many people feared to enter — the site of the infamous Central Park Jogger incident — to a place where elders, families, children, and solitary females feel safe.

Use and Activity Contribute to Safety

The City and Conservancy recognized that policing alone would not achieve the desired effect on safety. The park had to be populated to make it feel safe and this meant attracting people with amenities and activities.

Seizing the Opportunity for Education in Nature and Ecology

Between the organized activities at the Dana Center and the innovative hands-on research and teaching programs initiated by the schools, the Meer area has become a focus for environmental education.

Building in Maintenance

The physical improvements made at the Meer would not have lasted long without the well funded and well organized maintenance program the Conservancy has put in place. Due to adequate budgets, zoning of responsibilities, and the use of volunteers, the area is very well kept up.

ASSESSING PROJECT SUCCESS...

...BY ITS GOALS

To Restore This Part of Central Park

At the time of writing, the restoration of the Meer area was almost complete. The Meer and surrounding landscaping had been

returned to a healthy and beautiful state. The only remaining unfinished pieces were one play area and the restaurant and, as much as some local residents may want the restaurant, the Meer area did not feel incomplete without it.

To Make the Area Safe and Attractive

Crime has dropped significantly based on more activity, design improvements, and increased police presence and responsiveness. The area now feels safe to casual visitors and residents. The beauty of the area has been restored and new features are being maintained.

To Draw Local Residents Back to the Park

By observation and report, the project is successful in drawing local residents back into the park. While some never stopped using it (at least in the daytime), now many who avoided it (especially the very young, the elderly, and women) appear there in large numbers. The Dana Center, the lake, and the playground are specific attractions and many organized activities also draw people.

To Reintegrate the North and South Parts of the Park

The restoration and maintenance program appears to have had an important impact on drawing users up from the south. This includes attractions such as those mentioned immediately above as well as improved circulation which makes north-south movement more easy and pleasant.

To Involve the Neighboring Community in Planning and Programming

While the Conservancy had to learn about community involvement, they appear now to take it very seriously and to be doing a good job of integrating participation into their planning and management processes. The Upper Park Community Advisory Committee and the work done at Frederick Douglass Circle attest to this.



PHOTO BY SARA CEDAR MILLER, PARK PHOTOGRAPHER

...BY SELECTION COMMITTEE CONCERNS

Why Was This Area Allowed to Fall into Disrepair?

The budget crisis in New York City in the 1970s led to drastic reductions in funds available for repairs, improvements and regular maintenance in the park. While the entire park suffered, this area was subject to greater abuse and declined faster and farther than others.

How is the Project Area Used? What is the Balance between Casual and Programmed Activities?

Use is varied and, at peak times, intense. Activities range from the relatively passive (walking, sitting, talking) to the active (jogging, skating, biking, using playground equipment, fishing). Many activities are informal while others are organized by the Dana Center, schools, and bird watching groups.

How are the Programs Funded and Operated? Whom do They Serve?

Dana Center programs are funded from the Conservancy's operating budget as well as from targeted gifts and grants. Dana Center

and Meer-focussed activities serve all age groups from the surrounding neighborhoods and other parts of the city. School-based activities serve the children in the area.

Why Wasn't the Restaurant Built? Is There a Plan for One?

The restaurant project was abandoned due to lack of financing at a period when there was a general recession and the real estate market crashed. The current concept is for the Conservancy to construct the building and have the operator complete tenant improvements, lowering the amount of capital required of them — but the search for a donor to underwrite the restaurant has not yet succeeded. We note that this project does not appear to be included in the current massive capital campaign.

What Impact Has the Project Had on the Surrounding Area?

The project is believed to have had an impact on the surrounding areas. Businesses have opened at or near the corner of 5th Avenue and 110th Street. Apartment buildings on 110th Street have been renovated without displacement. People from the area use the park and are very pleased to have this amenity at their disposal again.

Is There a Sustainable Maintenance Plan?

The Conservancy has maintained the Meer area from its general operating revenues. The Meer does not have a dedicated maintenance endowment as a few other areas do.

SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

The Selection Committee found Harlem Meer to be an admirable project of very high quality. The landscape and building design, as well as the maintenance programs are exemplary. The committee was particularly impressed by the combination of national prominence of Central Park and the social significance that derives from the Meer being located within Harlem. While the Conservancy had to learn how to plan together with local constituencies, they clearly involved neighbors in planning the renovation, programming activities, and improving security.

While the Selection Committee found no weaknesses with the project itself, they wondered about certain of its features, primarily its questionable replicability in that both Central Park and New York City are so unique. It also bothered certain members of the committee that the city had allowed such deterioration to occur. They felt that the park should have been a city responsibility, but that the city abdicated it. To overcome governmental neglect required an extraordinary level of private effort and investment — resources that would be more difficult to find in other cities. The committee also wondered what the city had learned from the experience that would enable them to be better stewards for the balance of the park system or to deal with other problems more effectively.

For More Information...

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