

BRIDGING THE NATURE-CULTURE DIVIDE II: STEWARDSHIP OF CENTRAL PARK'S WOODLANDS

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Abstracts

Setting the Stage: History and Issues

Christopher Nolan

Wild Garden: The Story of Central Park's Woodlands

Within the “constant suggestion of an unlimited range of rural conditions” envisioned by Central Park’s designers, its rustic woodland landscapes were conceived as a dramatic contrast to the pastoral meadows and serene lakes they created to provide the people of the city with a reprieve from the dehumanizing effects of urban life. Though most evocative of wilderness, the picturesque wooded landscapes were as much a product of design as the rest of the Park, supported by elaborate infrastructure and extensively planted with a diverse horticultural palette. Sustaining these landscapes would prove to be one of the great challenges of the Park’s long history. In the twentieth century, changing perspectives on recreation—compounded over time by diminished fiscal resources, management neglect, and destructive use—contributed to their deterioration. By the 1970s, the health and character of the woodlands were severely compromised. But park devotees who recognized their unique value as a refuge from the City for both people and wildlife, and who understood their vulnerability and the special care they require, remained committed to reviving and sustaining these landscapes. Today, after thirty years of the Park’s renewal that has included foundational restoration work in its woodlands, the Central Park Conservancy is planning for their comprehensive restoration and long-term management in the context of a restored Park that is both more intensely used and more professionally managed than at any time in its history.

Panel 1: Public Practitioners

Eric W. Sanderson

The City That Wants To Be A Forest

The climate, biogeography, and history of the archipelago of islands arising at the mouth of the Hudson River, otherwise known as New York City, suggest forest. New York City would be a forest (or more exactly, seven kinds of forest) fringed by tidal wetlands and eelgrass meadows, interlaced with sparkling streams and generous springs, and punctuated with highbush blueberry thickets, red-maple hardwood and Atlantic cedar swamps and other ecosystems, except that now it is a city. Cities are dense, continuous settlements of people, comprised of buildings, streets, parks, and other ecosystems; in New York City, these cultural ecosystems provide home and habitat to 8 million citizens, workplaces for another 2 – 4 million breadwinners, and entertainment to 120,000 tourists per day, who come to see the shows, the shops, and, on occasion, the forests. For at the center of the city are the woodlands of Central Park. The tension between the human network of relations and the larger, embracing network of nature can divide us or -- if we care to recognize it -- form a bridge to a more inclusive idea of what cities and forests mean and may yet become.

Michael Boland
Revitalizing the Presidio Forest

Founded by the Spanish in 1776, the historic Presidio of San Francisco was protected as a national park site in 1994. For over two centuries, the 1500-acre Presidio landscape evolved to serve ever-changing military purposes, leaving a physical legacy that includes six million square feet of built space, over 1,000 historic buildings and features, San Francisco's most complete collection of remnant natural areas, and a 300-acre forest planted in the 1880's and 1890's.

The Presidio forest is the post's largest historic feature that contributes to the Presidio's status as a National Historic Landmark District. In the 130 years since the forest was planted, it has developed many "values" - historic, ecological, scenic, recreational, functional - and has become synonymous with the Presidio. However, due to its age and lack of maintenance under the Army, today much of the forest is rapidly declining.

The Presidio Trust is undertaking a phased, thirty-year restoration strategy that aims to strike a balance between maintaining the forest's historic integrity and protecting its various other values. The premise underlying the Trust's strategy is that restoring beloved public landscapes like the Presidio forest requires a multi-dimensional approach that includes elements ranging from 21st century arboriculture to public art.

Todd Forrest
Human\Nature
Restoration of the Thain Family Forest at The New York Botanical Garden

At the heart of The New York Botanical Garden lies the fifty-acre Thain Family Forest, the largest stand of old-growth forest in New York City. The Forest has been preserved by generations of stewards, celebrated by painters and poets, and scrutinized by botanists and ecologists for over a century. It has served as the Botanical Garden's living laboratory, outdoor classroom, and sanctuary from urban encroachments since 1895. The Garden's founders believed that the Forest was an entirely self-sustaining climax ecosystem that could only be harmed by human intervention and thus prescribed a "let alone" management policy. However, more than one hundred years of close observation has shown that anthropogenic environmental change will ultimately lead to the irreversible decline of the Forest's native flora and fauna. We now know that nature and culture are inextricably linked in the Forest and active management is necessary to keep this irreplaceable natural landscape "native." In his presentation, Todd Forrest will describe how the Garden's approach to stewardship of the Forest has evolved from a policy of "let alone" to active restoration and discuss the ecological, educational, and research goals of the ongoing management program.

Christian Zimmerman, FASLA
Can an Urban Woodland Really be Restored?
Prospect Parks Woods: A Case Study

Along with water and greensward, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux held woodlands as essential to park design. Once successful as a designed but naturally operating system, neglect and misuse had taken a huge toll on Prospect Park's 150 acre woodlands. With wildlife and its habitat

vanishing, this portion of the Park was underutilized by the public as the City neglected to maintain the area creating an environment that was perceived to be dangerous. When the restoration efforts began, changing the public's perception of the area and restoring a native habitat were two of the highest priorities. The fear was that without public support, once restored, the area would once again go into decline. The challenge was how much and what type of public interaction was desired. Being "loved to death" was a real concern. How do we balance restoring and maintaining a woodland for nature's sake while promoting public interaction with this natural area. Prospect Park has been struggling with this for the last twenty years; its successes, failures and challenges will be discussed.

Panel 2: Private Practitioners

Elizabeth K. Meyer, FASLA Urban Park Woodlands

From designed artifacts to affective spaces and entangled systems The Central Park Woodlands are diverse patches of varying size, density, character and use. Olmsted and Vaux imagined these "mysterious" rambles, "rough and rude" woodlands, and soothing woodland/meadow verges within a conception of Central Park as a work of art. The park was a constructed urban place—a social space designed to "produce certain effects upon the minds of men." The park was also an experiment in managed change, as the designers installed the original plant palette of natives and hardy exotics cognizant of both the inevitability of growth as well as necessity of clearing and pruning. Through a close reading of Olmsted's writings about parks and woods, including "The Psychological Effect of Park Scenery" (1868), the entry "Park in the American Cyclopaedia (1875) and "The Use of the Axe" (1889), we find productive and surprising entanglements of use and effect, nature and culture, birds/animals and humans, ecology and psychology. By emphasizing the concepts of *effects* and *managed change*, contemporary park administrators, planners and designers are creating new frameworks for managing the park's woodlands. In doing so, they are circumventing past debates about design integrity that were biased towards a material culture preservation of the woodlands, such as the exact location of specific tree species or particular vistas. Through this focus on design effects and change over time, we might, finally, stop obsessing about nature and culture as unrelated categories in need of balance. Instead, we can begin to manage, and imagine, designed urban woodlands such as those Central Park in light of the *effects* of changing social uses, extreme weather events, and new ecological paradigms, and the *affects* that the experience of, and interaction with, these woodlands have on the minds of contemporary men and women.

Dennis McGlade, RLA, FASLA Designing within the Nature/Culture Divide

The landscape of eastern North America has been managed or mismanaged for a long time, depending on one's point of view or values. According to Charles C. Mann, in his book [1491, New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus](#), in pre-Columbian times, east coast forests of North America were extensively farmed by native peoples—such that they might be more properly termed "park-like". When European diseases wiped out huge populations of Native Americans after initial contact in the 16th Century, the plant knowledge that informed their way of life also became extinct.

Their landscape management practices ceased. BY the 18th Century much of this managed landscape had grown back to woodlands that were perceived by newer European arrivals as a forest primeval.

Clearing for agriculture and the growth of towns and cities in the next century removed huge expanses of these woodlands, only to have them re-grow with the abandonment of much of the farmland in the 20th Century, except of course for that agricultural land that was transformed into suburbs. This re-growth woodland would probably be unrecognizable by the Indians or the settlers of the 18th Century. Where our cities spread in the 19th century and later retreated in the 20th century, there is an even more exotic vegetation mix, creating plant communities that have adapted to these sites with elevated temperatures, and dry, polluted, and nutrient-poor soils. As landscape architects, to what natural/cultural aspiration do we design and manage? The American landscape of pre-European contact as managed by Native Americans, or the landscape before that, immediately following the end of the last ice age, and before the land was settled? Or the primeval forests as described by 18th century writers?

It is in the context of these natural and cultural fluctuations of the American terrain that landscape architects practice with motives toward conservation, rehabilitation, restoration or some other vision for the future. Which landscapes are the more real - the existing mélange of second growth forest, suburbs, cities, and brown field sites, or those of the of the past as remembered in letters, journals or imagined and reconstructed through the writings of contemporary archeologists and paleontologists? The role of the landscape architect requires design thinking that is inclusive and deliberate in considering a wider client group than just homo sapiens as we attempt to address the notion of “man in nature”. Or more properly phrased “man of nature”?

Keith Bowers, FASLA, RLA, PWS
A Novel Approach to Restoring Central Park’s Woodlands

Humans are altering the planet’s ecosystems in ways and in magnitude unthinkable even a few short decades ago. Climate change, habitat fragmentation, and invasive species are rapidly changing species composition and ecosystem functions different from anything we have seen in past or present systems. These new systems are being dubbed ‘novel’ ecosystems by restoration ecologists. While ecosystems are always changing, the rate and pervasiveness of change from multiple environmental and cultural stressors are making us rethink what it means to restore and manage these communities. Certainly then, Central Park, like many urban parks across the nation, could be characterized as a novel ecosystem. If Central Park is a novel ecosystem, and if our analogue for the eastern deciduous forest is rapidly disappearing, then what does it mean to restore, manage and steward the Central Park Woodlands? All landscape interventions we undertake display an underlying set of ethical and moral precepts. Do we embrace an anthropocentric paradigm and mix and match biota to fit narrow human objectives or do we follow a biocentric approach and make it a fundamental right for all life forms to exist? Or is there a middle ground?

Margie Ruddick
Wildness/Design

“Wildness” in public and private landscape projects benefits people, ecosystems, and the planet. Wild areas today provide the kid of respite from modern life that the pastoral landscape provided to 19th Century cities. In fact wildlife sanctuaries have become the added value to new development

that golf courses once were. A place where people can go to feel connected to nature and natural processes has been documented to provide health – mental health as well as physical health – benefits, in studies by scientists and naturalists.

Integrating patches and corridors of wildlife refuge into such an urban landscape as Central Park has also been documented to significantly raise the level of ecological health of the larger landscape. The data on Central Park's role in migratory bird patterns has confirmed this.

The matrix for ecological growth often appears chaotic and “messy” to the untrained eye. But our design approach can integrate the beneficial properties of woodland, for instance, within a design language appropriate to the city and to our culture. Landscape architects, architects, and designers are currently developing a design language that no longer splits the landscape between the wild and the designed.

I will end with a number of projects that illustrate the integration of the “mess” required to promote ecological health within an urban landscape design language.