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Indian Tribes, States, Local
Governments and the
Private Sector



U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Cultural Resources

A Reality Check for Our Nation's Parks

Charles A. Birnbaum

Welcome to the second thematic issue of *CRM* dedicated to cultural/historic landscapes¹. This edition has been prepared in conjunction with the first International Symposium on the Conservation of Urban Squares and Parks to be held in North America (May 12-15, 1993) and includes 14 contributors from across the United States and Canada.

The past decade has yielded significant advancements in the park conservation and landscape preservation movements. The first "modern" park conservancy, The Central Park Conservancy, was founded in 1980, and many have followed. There has also been a succession of technical publications on the registration, identification, evaluation and treatment of landscapes such as historic parks.² Yet a reality check is still in order. As architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable stated just months ago, "*In recent years a shift has taken place in the way we perceive reality, a shift so pervasive that it has radically altered basic assumptions about art and life.... It has instantly recognizable characteristics—an emphasis on surface gloss, on pastiche, on the use of familiar but bowdlerized elements from the history of design, on tenuous symbolism and synthetically created environments... I do not know just when we lost our sense of reality or interest in it, but at some point it was decided that the evidence of the built world around us was not compelling; that it was possibly permissible, and even desirable to substitute a more agreeable product. Once it was decided that reality was disposable, its substance could be revised, manipulated and expanded.*"³

(Reality—continued on page 3)



Fig. 1. New seating along Central Park's Concert Ground at the Mall. Could this "more agreeable product" be characterized as a "synthetically created environment?" Is this a trend? Is this good preservation? Photo by the author.

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A Reality Check for Our Nation's Parks

(continued from page 1)

In response to this dilemma, and to provide technical guidance through illustrated project work, this issue of CRM has been developed with a planning and implementation focus. This includes three sections that address: (1) establishing a context for treatment; (2) planning for treatment; and, (3) treatment implementation. The resources included are all parks by definition, but in the very broadest sense. These include park systems (including parks, parkways and boulevard connectors), cemeteries, golf courses, campuses, woodland preserves, village greens and open spaces, and public gardens/estates.

This issue of CRM has also been prepared at the end of an eight month review period for the draft *Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Landscapes*.⁴ Perusing these comments as they came into our office, and working closely with the individual contributors, there are similar suggestions and concerns that may be summarized in this overview. These are as follows:

1. Establish a historical "context" for landscapes.

Here the authors had different concerns ranging from the need for historical background materials on the clients and culture (i.e. John and Susan Bixby, the sheep farmers from Maine at Rancho Los Alamitos; or the progressive industrialist John H. Patterson at Hills and Dales); landscape architecture/design styles of the era (i.e., the naturalistic and ornamental styles in 19th century cemetery design at Mt. Auburn Cemetery; a park rustic style, Central Park) design philosophy, career canon and extant legacy of a practitioner or style on the American landscape today (i.e., Warren Manning at Stan Hywet Hall; George E. Kessler or Hare and Hare in Kansas City; and Edward Bennett or Jens Jensen in Chicago)

A natural response to these concerns is the theme study of *Landscape Architecture in the NPS, 1916-1942*. This is the first National Historic Landmark theme study to deal specifically with historic designed landscapes of any type. In his article, Ethan Carr suggests that the study will "catalog as many examples as possible," and will then "establish a framework for selecting a group of exceptional park designs that illustrate this aspect of American landscape architectural history." Carr and others also suggest that establishing the necessary context is difficult due to the "shortage of sec-

ondary literature on the history of the American park movement."⁵

Of the fifteen or so landscapes included in this issue of CRM, five are National Historic Landmarks, eleven are listed on the National Register, with nine having recognized significance in landscape architecture.

2. Adopt and endorse a comprehensive preservation planning process.

The approach taken by all of the contributors recognized the need to undertake a comprehensive and often rigorous planning process. In Chicago's parks, Julia Sniderman references the need for a "comprehensive basis to manage the whole system of Park District historic resources and describes a "preservation framework plan" that identifies a landscape's contributing features and guides sensitive treatment. The Kansas City Legacy highlighted by Cydney Millstein also recognizes this need based on a solid research and analysis foundation. Millstein believes that with such a foundation established, "it is now possible for the custodians of Kansas City's park and boulevard system to make educated treatment decisions."

Other authors recognize that at times the process is ongoing. Linda Fardin suggests that "planning for treatment is not an end in itself but a means by which informed decisions can be made." David Streatfield also agrees, and recognizes that this may at times be a continuing process. In the case of Rancho Los Alamitos, the master plan was actually "adjusted after new archival findings were integrated in the evaluation process."

3. Recognize that "rehabilitation" is not a dirty word and will likely be the most honest and frequent treatment strategy for landscapes.

In our dialogue and in the papers that follow, the authors have confessed to reading about successful "period restorations" in preservation or popular culture magazines. However, many of the authors recognize that public parks possess multiple layers of history, and therefore, recommend rehabilitation as the most appropriate treatment.

A sidebar in *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, rev. 1992, states that rehabilitation as a treatment may be appropriate: "When repair and replacement of deteriorated features are necessary; when alterations or additions to the property are

planned for a new or continued use; and when its depiction at a particular time is not appropriate."

With this as an established datum, it is still ironic that several of the authors are uncomfortable with allowing

(Reality—continued on page 4)



Fig. 2. Recent rehabilitation work in Columbus Park included the waterfall, cascades, rocky brook and associated landscape for this popular Prairie feature in Jens Jensen's most extant and authenticated park in Chicago. Photo by the author.

(Reality—continued from page 3)

the term “rehabilitation” to stand alone. Several were compelled to augment with such adaptations as “in the spirit of”; or, with qualifiers in the same sentence, such as “interpretive,” “sympathetic,” “thoughtful,” and “respectful.” There is room here still for further acclamation and acceptance.

4. Liaison with allied professionals and community outreach. Do not operate in a preservation vacuum.

As Linda Fardin states, “Whether expressed in a report, developed in a formal master plan, or simply understood by owner, managers, designers, maintenance staff and others involved, it is critical that an understanding of the make-up of the heritage-character (or, character-defining features) of the site and of long-term objectives be shared between all who influence site conservation and development.”

Upon a review of the four papers contained under *Treatment Implementation*, it is clear that the landscape preservation professional must effectively coordinate with allied preservation, design, construction, environmental, and legal disciplines. This includes material conservation, structural, civil, and traffic engineering (Genesee Valley Park); engineering, architecture, and

construction supervision (rustic furnishings in Central Park); arborists and horticulturists (Stan Hywet Hall); and, research scientists and biologists (eastern hemlocks in the Hudson Valley).

At Hills and Dales, the project team presented all potential preservation concepts to area residents and affected public organizations. This process not only resulted in a plan that retained historic fabric, and responded to today’s users and site context, it also remained faithful and honest to the original client and visionary designer. Today the adjacent community understands the natural and cultural significance of their resource, and are therefore informed stewards.

5. Assume that landscapes are dynamic, and cannot be frozen in time.

Here again there was much consensus, and most agreed that a realistic maintenance and management agenda (one that considers current use and fiscal commitment), was imperative. This was stressed by both Timothy Marshall and Shary Page Berg. These two and others also recommend the need to coordinate with “hands-on” maintenance staff and managers, and suggest that they are included in the planning process. Elizabeth Brabec suggests that we “may wish to recognize and support the fact that change is endemic in rural historic landscapes, and should approach landscapes in a fundamentally different aspect than built resources—landscapes are living, growing and changing entities.” Perhaps a broader rationale, as put forth by Fardin, is more universal, “think hard and twice before interrupting the continuity of the time scale.”

Finally we should recognize that project work takes a time and fiscal commitment. Sniderman suggests that “it will be years before a new vision for Grant Park can be fully realized.” It is important to remember that the same commitment was originally required to design and construct many of these irreplaceable resources; all of the parks included in this issue took between 10 and 30 years to realize, while some are still incomplete today.

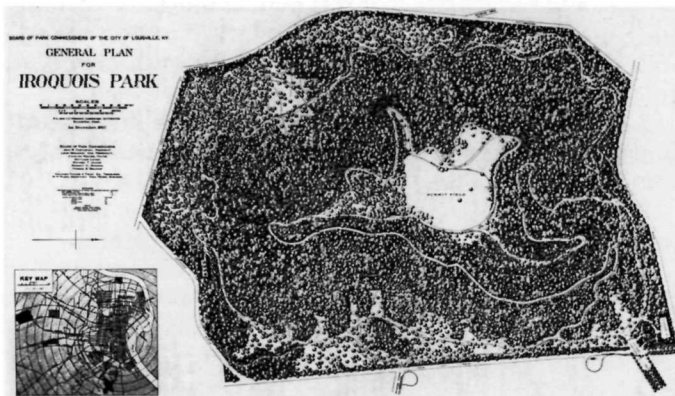


Fig. 3. *General Plan for Iroquois Park*, December 1897, F. L. and J. C. Olmsted, Landscape Architects, Brookline, MA. Courtesy Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

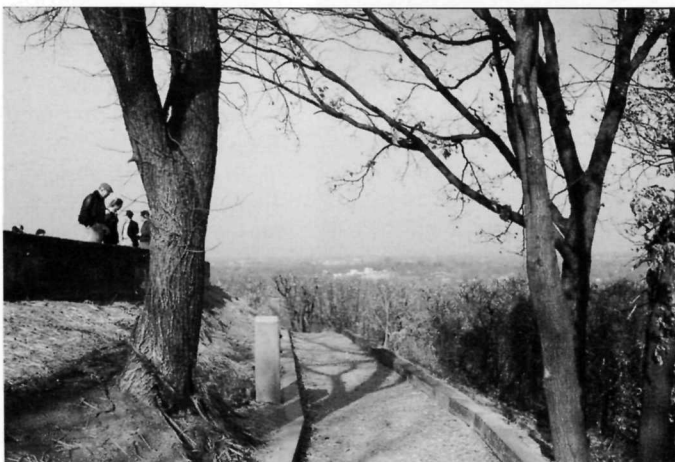


Fig. 4. In an effort to provide access up Iroquois Park’s hill, this standard 1980s project resulted in a degradation to geology and historic fabric. More recent efforts at Louisville’s Olmsted Park Conservancy recognize this shortcoming and aims to provide hill access along the historic woodland route in a rehabilitation treatment project proposal.

¹ The first thematic issue was guest edited by Robert R. Page, Vol. 14, No. 6, 1991.

² For a full list of publications, see *America’s Landscape Legacy*. This is available free from the NPS Preservation Assistance Division (424), P.O. Box 37127 Washington, DC 20013-2127.

³ “Inventing American Reality,” *New York Review of Books*, December 3, 1992, p. 24.

⁴ The draft *Guidelines* were out for public review from May 1992 to March 1, 1993. A limited number of copies are still available by request. Contact the NPS Preservation Assistance Division (424) Box 37127 Washington DC 20013-7127.

⁵ The author is more optimistic about this situation, as testified in the “Publications” discussion in the May/June issue of *Preservation Forum*.

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