

Central Park reshaped a city's mindset

By Heather Hewett | Special to The Christian Science Monitor

NEW YORK - In parks, as in fashion, New York led the way. In July of 1853, when the state set aside 778 acres in the middle of Manhattan Island to be used as "a public place," no American city had ever claimed so much private land for public use. The act forever altered Manhattan's developing grid of streets, and left the beloved Central Park as its legacy.

A century and a half later, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on the park's eastern border, is presenting "Central Park: A Sesquicentennial Celebration," an exhibition about its design and construction. Museum visitors can compare the park they see outside with the one imagined on the walls.

A great urban park should "inspire the imagination to experience the city differently and cause us to think differently about who we are," says Theodore Landsmark, president of the Boston Architectural Center. This summer, New York City's commemoration of Central Park's 150th anniversary will give visitors an opportunity to reflect not only on the history of the park, but also on the reason this visionary space continues to draw visitors and inspire the development of urban parks nationwide.

Urban parks today

Central Park's designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, originally conceived of it as an idyllic refuge from the harshness of city life. Twenty years in the building, it reshaped a rocky, swampy area into a nearly unbroken landscape of lawns and wooded areas.

But by the 1960s and '70s, overuse and the rededication of park space to sports facilities, huge concerts, and political rallies all took their toll. The park was, in effect, a victim of its own success. Then, in the 1980s, a private/public partnership called the Central Park Conservancy began raising funds for its restoration. Three hundred million dollars and 23 years later, the group has revitalized the space as a haven for wildlife and tired city dwellers alike.

Over the years, the successful park has had many imitators. In Brooklyn, Chicago, and Buffalo it inspired movements for urban parkland. Boston even hired Mr. Olmsted to work on a six-mile string of parks and parkways known as the Emerald Necklace.

Today, as many urban spaces are being converted to parkland, the question of what city dwellers want from parks remains vital. In Boston, a proposed Rose Kennedy Greenway - 27 acres of land above a newly built tunnel and under an elevated central artery - has the city divided over how best to

develop the long sliver of land.

Some say that Olmsted's original vision - rooted in the Romantic belief that nature would provide mental and spiritual refreshment - should remain the guiding principle. Simone Auster, president of the city's Emerald Necklace Conservancy, envisions a "green ring around the city," connecting the Greenway to the nine parks in the Emerald Necklace.

Others believe the Greenway should reflect 21st-century ideas and needs. Urban designer David Dixon, president of the Boston Society of Architects, argues that the Greenway must offer visitors other enticements, such as computerized fountains, skating rinks, and performances at night. "Passive entertainment no longer works in our culture. We need to offer reasons for people to choose to come into a public park."

Other debates center around funding. Some proposals for the Greenway, such as the Massachusetts Horticultural Society's "Garden Under Glass," would depend on raising private dollars. Though proponents defend using private funds for park revitalization, citing the Central Park Conservancy, a public/private partnership, as an effective model, critics suggest that such joint ventures undercut the democratic spirit of public parks and the system of paying for public works out of taxes.

"We have a very diminished concept of the public realm today," says Columbia University history professor Elizabeth Blackmar, coauthor of "The Park and the People." "We really don't know if the Central Park model will work for other parks."

Central Park's story

Those who study the history of Central Park say it still offers many lessons in how to build and maintain a successful urban park.

In 1857, Olmsted's and Vaux's "Greensward" proposal for the new park, was one of 33 designs submitted to a public competition. It imagined a picturesque landscape of hills and trees, a place where New Yorkers from across the socio-economic spectrum could escape the harshness of city life.

But achieving this vision required a complete transformation of the area's rugged terrain. Swamps had to be drained, lakes created, boulders blasted away, bridges built, roadways paved, and trees and shrubs planted.

"There's nothing natural in Central Park. It took an immense effort to create it," says Morrison Heckscher, curator of the Met's park exhibit.

And it didn't come easily. Dr. Heckscher says that while the park project "was the perfect marriage of two complementary talents - Vaux the architect, and Olmsted the manager," without Olmsted's administrative acumen their design would never have been built. Dr. Landsmark agrees, adding that while talented designers are crucial, "great parks come about because of clients who demand great parks and implement them."

After two decades and a budget ten times the initial estimate, the park was

finished. The result - sweeping meadows and rustic woods left largely uninterrupted through the ingenious use of sunken transverse roads and curvilinear paths - provided the illusion of untouched nature.

The park was an instant success. "It was so unique to have a park," says Sara Cedar Miller, photographer and historian for the Central Park Conservancy and author of "Central Park, an American Masterpiece." "It spawned movements for urban parks in other cities."

But the 20th century brought challenges, as Central Park tried to balance an increasingly diverse set of public needs. Sports like tennis, softball, and baseball grew in popularity. "It was an incredible period of city growth, and many of the park's new constituencies were interested in active recreational activities," says Dr. Blackmar.

Partly in response to this demand, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses transformed the park between 1934 and 1960 by creating the Great Lawn over what had been the old reservoir. He also built concrete playgrounds and athletic fields, baseball diamonds, a field house, and Wollman skating rink. As permanent sporting facilities replaced some of Olmsted's picturesque landscapes, Central Park administrator Doug Blonsky says, the park slipped into a period of decline. "There was no managed use," he says.

These problems were compounded by economic decline in the 1970s, which reduced the budget for parks in many cities. At the same time, the historic preservation movement was raising public consciousness about 19th-century parks, and private advocacy groups like the Central Park Conservancy began to form. In the years since, groups such as Brooklyn's Prospect Park Alliance and Boston's Emerald Necklace Conservancy have modeled themselves after it.

Today, Central Park continues to draw millions of people, who come to play sports, hear concerts, see Shakespeare plays, enjoy the natural landscape, and watch birds - nearly 200 different species can be found in the park, which has become an important migration stopover. While the park is not a "natural" landscape, for many New Yorkers it "provides the sole opportunity for forming a relationship with the natural world," says Eric Sanderson of the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York City.

Blackmar says the park's current uses draw it closer to Olmsted's original vision than has been the case in years. "The earlier tradition of the contemplative park is being made relevant again to a new generation of parkgoers," she says.

Few dispute the continuing need for urban parks. "We're an increasingly diverse society, and we've lost most of the common ground we used to have," says Dixon. "Parks play an integral role in answering the question: Are we successful in accommodating our diversity?"

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