

# METROPOLIS

the metropolis observed

## future prospects for the park

Like persistent voices in the wilderness, sculptor David Schafer's installations loom out of the bushes of Brooklyn's Prospect Park. There are 20 of them, big yellow signs. Standing almost 20 feet tall, the pieces are reminiscent of billboards, but in function, they are closer to the tags you see on cages in the zoo. Serving as giant footnotes to the vegetation, they speak softly, though each is carried by a big stick.

Unveiled last July, the billboards display uncredited quotations—nuggets of landscape philosophy and architectural whimsy—from the park's designer, Frederick Law Olmsted. And though they do not intend to snicker ironically, the sculptures have baffled most passersby, illuminating the gap between Olmsted's lofty intentions and the recreational pursuits of the park's present-day visitors.

Now, as Prospect Park embarks on a multimillion-dollar capital improvement program over the next decade, an effort to raise consciousness is part of the challenge in restoring the space to its former health and dignity. The New York City Parks Department must somehow mitigate the overwhelming sense of entitlement amongst park users with an awareness of their responsibility to the park's history and future.

The original idea for Prospect Park was hatched in the 1860s as Brooklyn's patricians and politicians watched the construction of Manhattan's Central Park with the envy of a rival slipping into second place. At the time, Brooklyn was an independent city on the verge of a manufacturing explosion. The possibility that Brooklyn might lose its affluent class to Manhattan—and become a city of industrial workers and impoverished immigrants living amidst the acrid fumes from local factories—prompted politicians to quickly secure a parcel of undeveloped land around Flatbush Avenue and hire Olmsted, designer of Central Park, to create Prospect Park.

The creation of the park, the sponsors reasoned, would strengthen Brooklyn's infrastructure, economy, and appearance. Most important, to Olmsted, Calvert Vaux, and other intellectuals of the nineteenth century parks movement, the new space would offer an invaluable public health amenity.

After years of political struggles and acres of blueprints, the 526-acre Prospect Park opened to unanimous acclaim in



1866, and except for minor alterations that rankled Olmsted, the great landscape architect deemed Prospect Park superior to Central Park (which is about 800 acres). This was due mostly to Prospect's shape and breadth, which enabled park users, as Olmsted once theorized, to forget the surrounding city and "withdraw themselves at some few points from the sight of town houses and town traffic."

Arguably, this concept still succeeds today, and whereas Central Park never quite allows users to leave Manhattan's towering presence behind, Prospect achieves Olmsted's paradox: it offers an invitation to forget the borough of Brooklyn and experience "nature"—diagramed down to the smallest magnolia, tamarisk, and hydrangea.

Any visitor can vouch for Prospect Park's enduring appeal: its acreage encompasses the magnificent Long Meadow, the only freshwater lake in the borough, and the last forest in Brooklyn. But through the Seventies, the park suffered rapid physical deterioration. Total annual visitors shrank by more than 60 percent, to 1.7 million, and a poll of city residents indicated that 44 percent believed it was unwise to venture into the park at all.

Thanks to the rejuvenation of neighborhoods such as Park Slope and the maintenance efforts of the Parks Department, Prospect Park has rebounded since that time (with usership rising close to 5 million), but its resurgence was again jeopardized earlier this year. In June, schoolteacher Allyn Winslow was murdered by a teenager while bicycling in one of the park's more secluded areas. Predictably, park use plummeted in the weeks following the killing, yet to *Continued on page 15*

There is no doubt that the capital improvements being made in Prospect Park represent commitment and civic responsibility. But fixing walls, trimming weeds, planting shrubs—even the recent refurbishment of the Prospect Park Zoo—do not, in themselves, constitute broad urban vision for the parks. This point has been acknowledged by virtually all park officials and private patrons. Where will that vision come from, and who will pay to see it implemented? Upkeep and maintenance eats up much of the parks budget—Prospect Park, which gets approximately \$2.5 million from the city annually, depends on as much as \$500,000 a year in private donations raised by the Prospect Park Alliance. A look back over the past of New

York's parks might lead one to conclude that the lofty civic spirit that characterized the 1860s and, perhaps, the 1930s and Forties, has been reduced to a survivalist mentality that keeping even is the best that the city can hope for.

During the first half of this century, New York City added nearly 20,000 acres of parks; since the early Eighties, covering one of the greatest economic booms in city history, parkland has increased by less than 1,500 acres.

As noted in a recent report issued by Public Space for Public Life (a consortium led by the Parks Council and the Central Park Conservancy), New York's parks have paid for themselves many times over through tax revenue raised from thriving

nearby communities and have created thousands of construction jobs. Moreover, the report's poll indicates that approximately 90 percent of New Yorkers consider parks and playgrounds "very important" in making their city a livable place.

The question is, can New Yorkers of the late twentieth century begin to imagine again what the city could become rather than simply long for what it used to be? What makes the vision of the nineteenth century reformers who left us Central Park and Prospect Park so appealing—and yet, as David Schafer's sculptures illustrate, so confusing—is that they believed in the future of the city. Such faith seems to be in short supply these days.

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