

Central Park in Material Culture

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Urban design is one of the most important parts of one city's establishment. Urban design is working on dealing with the larger scale of groups of buildings, streets and public spaces, whole neighborhoods and districts, and entire cities, in order to make whole urban areas functional, attractive, and sustainable. Central Park, one of the most famous public parks in the world, is a big part of New York City's urban planning since the area it takes and social background when it was established, which makes reasons of why New York City's government decided to build the park in that size and why the design of Central Park by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted could win the design competition arouse curiosity of people. Except for the original reason of Central Park's establishment, how it works in the modern day is another aspect for people to research when they not only view Central Park as a famous landscape but also view it as a milestone of urban design's history. In the following paragraph, the structure and design of the central park is the first thing that will be mentioned as the first shoveling of the process of dig into the Central Park. Secondly, the historical background and social context are necessary for researching. Then, finding the different between Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted's design and other designing plans of Central Park is a good way for us to understand the decision that New York City's government made. Through these three aspects, this essay wants to find out the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of citizens and government at that time, and how the establishment of a park reflect the culture of New York society at the 1800s.

Central Park is an urban park in New York City. It bounded by Fifth Avenue, Eighth Avenue, 59th Street and 110th Street. The park is 2.5 miles long between 59th street and 110th street; 0.5

miles wide between Fifth Avenue and Eighth Avenue. There are seven bodies of water in the central park. The Reservoir, which is the widest body of water in Central Park, is between 97th Street and 85th Street. One other water body names Harlem Meer is on the north-east side of Central Park, and The Pond is on the south-east side. The Lake is one of the famous body of water in Central Park. The Lake is located close to the 79th Street. Except for the body of water, there are 4 streets across the Central Park that allow cars to go through. They are 97th Street, 85th Street, 79th Street and 65th Street. Also. three worldwide-known museums are located on Central Park area. The biggest and most famous one is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which located between 85th Street and 79th Street. The museum face to the Fifth Avenue. On the other side of the park, next to the 79th street, is another museum, American Museum of Natural History. These two museums are both built in a classic museum style, imposing grandeur and elegance. Another museum, Guggenheim, is way more modern than these two. One feature of the central part is that it has a circular area on the corner of the park. From this, we could easily find out that central park is a landscape that contains so many essential public services. It is not only a park that has beautiful views, fresh air, water bodies, but also an area that allows museums, zoos, memorial, all these different kinds of essential public servicing equipment or buildings, come together, which makes the culture and education undertaking works better. When people talk about the Central Park, it does not just mean a park, but an area that so many things going on that interesting and meaningful.

What makes the government come up with an idea of build a park in this size on Manhattan, the area that has such high land price? This question must have had shown in many people's mind when they saw the Central Park. The size of it, as the description above, is so incredible, especially when you compare it with all other buildings and parks around it. For answering this

question, we have to go back to see the history of New York City and the social situation at that time. Between 1821 and 1855, the population of New York City increased so fast. This made the city more crowded and busier. As the city grew and open space diminished, it became important to preserve open space for the city's citizenry.¹ Citizens wanted to get away from the noise and the busy city-life. However, there were only 12 named open space/public park before 1850, which could not satisfy the requirements of New Yorkers. New York City's need for a great public park spoke out by the famed poet and editor of the Evening Post William Cullen Bryant, as well as by the first American landscape architect, Andrew Jackson Downing, who predicted and began to publicize the city's need for a public park in 1844.² With the growth voice of needs of public park day by day, the government decided to make a plan of building a great public park. In 1856, a new era of park planning emerged when the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park was established to build that great landmark.

The landscape design contest commission for central park was held in 1857. The design of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux developed a plan that known as "Greensward Plan" nowadays. On October 13, 1857, just two weeks after the park dwellers left their homes, the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park offered prizes of four hundred to two thousand dollars for the four best proposals for "laying out the park." This notice for the first important landscape design competition in the United States elicited thirty-three varied proposals, which revealed the influence of English and continental traditions of landscape design as well as more

¹ "The Earliest New York City Parks," Earliest Parks : NYC Parks, , accessed April 05, 2018, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/earliest-parks>.

² "The Great Park Debate – 1850". CentralParkHistory.com. Retrieved October 20,2014.

eclectic vernacular ideas about what would make this public place appealing.³ Two-third of the proposed plans highlighted the natural landscape itself, and other plans emphasized an artificial civic display of formal avenues, exhibition halls, museums, fountains, statuary, and zoological or botanical gardens, intended simultaneously to instruct and inspire their viewers in the accomplishments of civilization. Finally, the proposed plan that made by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted won the first prize. Their plan emphasized its unique genius imply that artistic judgment alone governed the selection of the design. From the commissioners' perspective, more than aesthetics was at stake; politics as much as artistic merit determined just how the nation's first and most famous landscape park would be designed and built.⁴ In their design, the most influential innovations in the Central Park was made, the “separate circulation” systems for pedestrians, horseback riders, and pleasure vehicles. The "crosstown" commercial traffic was entirely concealed in sunken roadways (today called "transverses"), screened with densely planted shrub belts so as to maintain a rustic ambiance.⁵ Comparing the Central Park to another garden, Gardens of Versailles, we could find a lot of differences. The geometric shapes and symmetrical pattern layouts are the biggest features of French formal renaissance, which is influenced by the idea of Renaissance, harmony, and order. Since the garden was served to the royal family, it is more elegant than Central Park. All vegetation is constrained and directed, to demonstrate the mastery of man over nature

³ "The Design Competition," CentralParkHistory.com, accessed April 05, 2018, http://www.centralparkhistory.com/timeline/timeline_1850_compete.html.

⁴ "The Victors," CentralParkHistory.com, accessed April 05, 2018, http://www.centralparkhistory.com/timeline/timeline_1850_victors.html

⁵ "Central Park," Wikipedia, April 03, 2018, , accessed April 05, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Park#cite_note-timeline-1850-debate-21.

Trees are planted in straight lines, and carefully trimmed, and their tops are trimmed at a set height. The residence serves as the central point of the garden, and its central ornament. No trees are planted close to the house; rather, the house is set apart by low parterres and trimmed bushes.⁶ This represents the French centralization of authority. Also, the style of garden shows the desire of enjoyments that nobilities had at that time. Even its also show that people's needs at that time were getting closer to the higher level, it only satisfied the needs of nobilities but ignore people from other classes. The Gardens of Versailles stands too far from normal citizens. It just is a symbol of imperial power. The Central Park is totally different from that. Central Park is open to the public, and more focus on natural beauty, instead of artificial elegance. It aims to satisfy all citizens' needs of having a chance to get close to nature.

All these lead us to a direction that said the existence of parks is a reflection of how people seeking their pleasure nowadays. They are tired of the busy city life, they are naturally want to close to nature, they need a place to relax. It's not about money or material enjoyment, but about the psychology. If we consider the "Maslow's hierarchy of needs", we could find that the people's needs nowadays are getting closer to the top of pyramid nowadays. This shows the improvement of whole society.

From the analysis of the central park, we could connect it to the material culture to see how it shows the culture of society. Since the Central Park is the result of citizens' needs, it is easy to find out that the process of urbanization improvement is improved to the very high level, that people's psychological needs are being essential in their lives.

• ⁶ Claude Wenzler, *Architecture du jardin*, Editions Ouest-France, 2003

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