

CENTRAL PARK CITY

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The grid as a rationalizing structure permeates every scale of human existence, from the lines on writing-paper to the organization of city blocks. While it may increase the level of efficiency of everyday life, it fails to address certain experiential needs which are also important. As architects concerned with environment we must recognize that the two are interdependent and delicately balanced.

Richard Sennett describes the urban street grid as a design manipulation which evokes a sense of timelessness — in the negative sense: 'Gridded space does no more than create a blank canvas for development. It subdues those who must live in the space, [by] disorienting their ability to see and to evaluate relationships. In that sense, the planning of neutral space is an act of dominating and subduing others.'¹

The contemporary obsession with technology as the answer to all our needs has engendered patterns of living which are predominantly diagrammatic. Similarly, urban planning has been reduced to the design of efficient circulation patterns, and public space has come to be regarded as a luxury. Architects help to reinforce such attitudes in their failure to create spaces where city dwellers can engage in replenishing activities. Joseph Rykwert has written that, 'Not only must the architect learn to make built scripture readable again, he must make movement the essential, even the controlling element of his plan. Not the interested movement of traffic, but the free and articulated movement of people to whom he offers a setting within which they may play the drama of their lives with dignity.'²

New York City and the Grid

In the early seventeenth century, when Dutch traders settled on the southern tip of Manhattan, it was an island which was sacred to the Indians as a site for their harvest ceremonies. The settlement prospered and gradually began to grow northward. By the early part of the nineteenth century the city's politicians had recognized its potential as an international centre of trade and commerce, and they realized that, instead of just letting it wander up the island until it reached the northern tip, an overall plan would be needed. Although there was some talk of an architectural competition, it was decided instead to superimpose a grid on the island. This was carried out between 1811 and 1850.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park (1850–75), disdainfully recounts an anecdote explaining the decision to create a grid. The story goes that one day the city politicians were standing around a map of Manhattan island that was lying on the ground.

There happened to be a gridded mason's tool on top of it, and somebody exclaimed, 'Can you think of anything finer?'³ Olmsted, who deplored the idea of the grid, explains the necessity of establishing a park within it: 'It should present an aspect of spaciousness and tranquillity with variety and intricacy of arrangement, thereby affording the most agreeable contrast to the confinement, bustle, and monotonous street-division of the city.'³

New York City and Central Park

A park within a city is not unusual. But a city within a park is a phenomenon that is rarely acknowledged.

The re-creation or imitation of paradise has often been an urban project: the garden would not only be created within the city, but would reflect the city.⁴ Thus the plan of a city with its radiating avenues is embodied in the garden of Versailles, a reflection, idealized in form, of a city made for the king of France. The garden not only reflected the city but might encapsulate some of the paradoxes and apparent oppositions of conventional thinking about culture and nature. In the sixteenth-century Villa Lante in Rome a wilderness garden epitomizes the purity of the Golden Age, while the geometrically arranged formal garden symbolizes civilization, which is synonymous with the city. In a more subtle way the embodiment of politics — the business of city and court — can be found in the gardens of Stowe in Buckinghamshire. Whig politicians retired there to seek not only refuge from active political affairs, but refreshment in an idyllic setting where their political ideals found poetic expression in the various temples and pavilions. Thus the juxtaposition of garden and city is revealed as essential to the qualities of each. Paradise can be perceived as the Heavenly City and/or the Garden of Eden.

An aerial photograph of the city of New York shows an island gridded with streets, within which is reserved the rectangular site of Central Park. Embedded within the park itself are what appear to be the ruins of a lost city, traced by the roads, the Promenade, the Mall, Bethesda Fountain, the Bowling Green, the Boat Pond. Analysis of this 'lost city' has revealed that at both a formal and a philosophical level it represents the plan of Manhattan.

Olmsted frequently referred to the Park and the City simultaneously, implying that the two might be seen as interchangeable.⁵ The unprecedented shape of Central Park (its proportions are 1:5, the same as those of the island in which it sits) was an inevitable consequence of the shape of Manhattan and of its existing street grid. In preparing his designs for the park Olmsted decided to study

plans of cities rather than other parks, for, as he wrote,

the form and position of Central Park are peculiar . . . and such that precedent with dealing with it is rather to be sought in the long and narrow boulevards of some of the old continental European cities, than in the broad parks with which, from its area in acres, we are most naturally led to compare it.⁶

He began by setting down the major road system, organizing it in a configuration similar to that of New York City.⁷ The main drive forms a continuous loop through the park, describing an island that is curiously similar in shape to Manhattan. The north-south orientation of the main drive parallels the avenues of the city and follows the perimeter of the park in a distorted fashion. This drive and the borders of the park describe a compressed core-and-periphery relationship similar to that between Manhattan and the closely bordering shores opposite. The transverse roads cut through the park in the same way that the major crosstown streets of Manhattan cut across the island, paralleling each other in orientation and serving the same purpose of forming a direct connection between the East Side and the West Side.

Olmsted compares these transverses to the then major crosstown streets of the City: 'Each of these will be the sole line of communication between one side of town and the other, for a distance equal to that between Chambers street and Canal street.'⁸ He also mentions Broadway: 'If we suppose but one crossing of Broadway to be possible in this interval, we shall realize that these transverse roads are destined to become . . . crowded thoroughfares.'⁹ In order to avoid creating a series of undesirable intersections between the Grand Promenade and the transverse roads, as exist between Broadway and the crosstown streets, Olmsted lowered the latter to a depth of about twelve feet below the surface of the ground. These, because they connect with the city grid, appear to be a continuation of it, yet in reality the primary road system of Central Park is essentially a warped grid composed of the main drive and the transverses. By using a device reminiscent of the English ha-ha Olmsted was able to create the illusion of a continuous landscape, while simultaneously subdividing it.

The gridded road structure divides the park into sections and each is conceived as a different type of landscape.¹⁰ These can be seen as neighbourhoods within the Park, just as the major crosstown streets and avenues of the City define its different neighbourhoods.

The Grand Promenade is the secondary system, paralleling Broadway in its diagonal orientation to the grid of Manhattan. The positioning of both was determined by topographical conditions. Broadway was originally an Indian trail heading due north along the contours of Manhattan. The site and orientation of the Grand Promenade were determined by Olmsted when he stood one day in the southeast corner of the Park, at the intersection of the main drive and one of the transverses, and observed that 'Vista Rock, the most prominent point in the landscape of the Lower Park, here first comes distinctly into view, and fortunately in a direction diagonal to the boundary lines'.¹¹

Along the axis of this Grand Promenade Olmsted placed the elements of an English country house and its park, making adjustments in scale between a mansion and garden for a family, to that of a mansion and garden for the 'family' of the City:¹²

In giving [the Grand Promenade] this prominent position, we look at it in the light of an artificial structure on the scale of magnitude commensurate with the size of the park, and intend in our design that it should occupy the same position of relative importance in the general arrangement of the plan that a mansion should occupy in a park prepared for private occupation.¹³

Olmsted's political ideals were embodied in this arrangement. An ardent democrat, he hoped to instil among the citizens of New York

a sense of ownership of and personal attachment to Central Park.

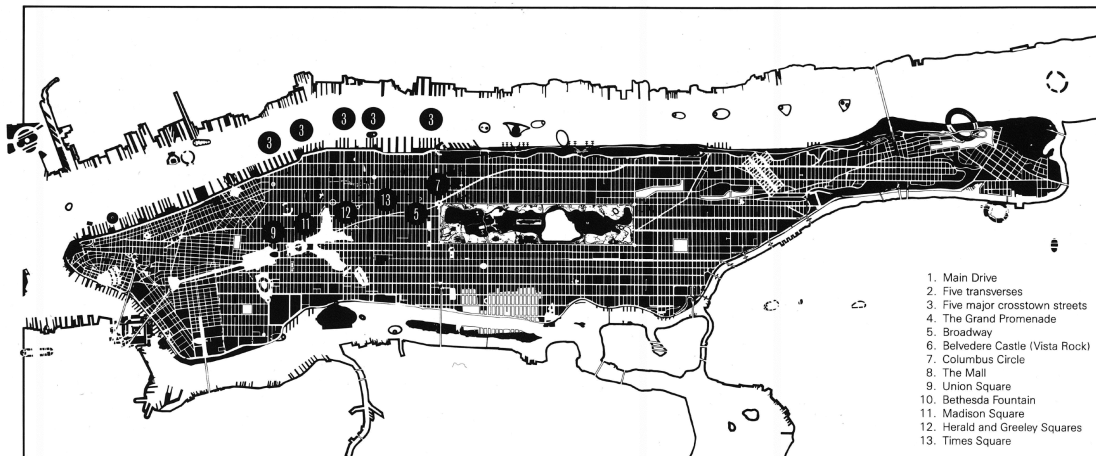
The Grand Promenade represents the grand entrance to the stately home, which would stand in the large open space of the Mall. The 72nd Street transverse, including the terrace where Sunday strollers parade, is the carriage entrance.¹⁴ The terrace overlooks Bethesda Fountain and the romantic landscape of the lake and the rambles beyond. The axis of the Grand Promenade continues, perceptually, through the landscape, to the view of the Belvedere Castle at Vista Point, which was built at a tiny scale in order to appear even more distant. To the east of the Mall is the harbour, and farther along is the flower garden (this has since been transformed into a miniature boat pond). To the west, in its proper position in relation to the house, is the bowling green.¹⁵

Numerous places were planned along the Grand Promenade where New Yorkers could engage in the custom of promenading. This represents another parallel with the role of Broadway *vis-à-vis* the City, for Broadway, as the centre of the theatre district, was the fashionable avenue for shopping and promenading — the true Grand Promenade of New York City.¹⁶ As the city moved northward, so did the theatre district, re-establishing itself along Broadway, which in 1854 was described by *Putman's Monthly* as 'not only the main artery of the city . . . [but also] the agglomeration of trade and fashion, business and amusement, public and private abodes, churches and theatres, barrooms and exhibitions, all collected into one promiscuous channel of activity and dissipation'.¹⁷

The City within the Park

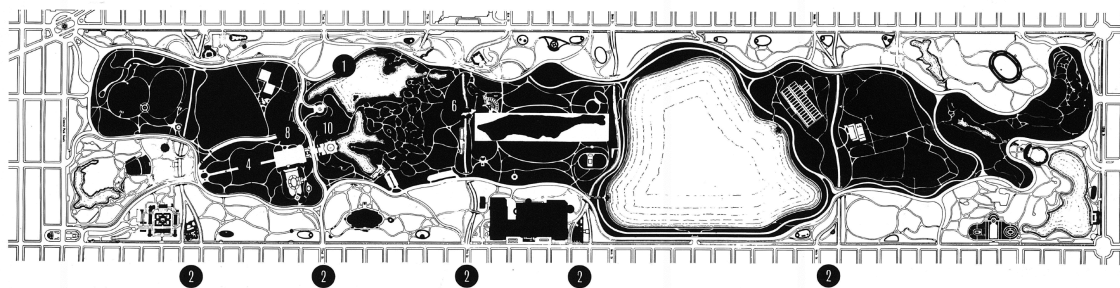
For Olmsted the need for Central Park was a direct result of its context: within the 'densely populated central portion of an immense metropolis', it provides 'a means to certain kinds of REFRESHMENT OF THE MIND AND NERVES which most city dwellers greatly need'.¹⁸ As an urban park it must respond in as complex a way as does the city to the needs of its inhabitants. In relation to the size and density of New York it is a vast area, yet in relation to the large variety of landscapes contained therein it is small: 'the comparatively small area . . . has been given a sense of boundlessness by being turned in upon itself to become a complex macrocosm of nature'.¹⁹ These varying landscapes can be seen as 'neighbourhoods' designed to suit the varying needs of the population: indeed the park could be described as a city clothed in foliage. The device of the mansion reinforces this idea, for in relation to the microcosm of the landscapes within which it sits its elements are enormous, implying a scale commensurate with that of a lost city.

If the plan of New York City is superimposed on the plan of Central Park, the parallels I have described above become clear. Vista Point and Columbus Circle are datum points, and the Grand Promenade and Broadway (and the Bowery) are datum lines. The distance between Columbus Circle and Union Square is the same proportionally as the distance between Belvedere Castle and the Mall of the Grand Promenade. This is significant, because Union Square and the Bowery were important parts of the City when the Park was designed, and the Mall and Union Square both serve as public gathering-places. The axis of the Grand Promenade culminates in Belvedere Castle, just as Columbus Circle creates a significant pause in Broadway at 59th Street (where Central Park begins). The location of the rectangular reservoir (now filled in) within Central Park is analogous to the location of Central Park within Manhattan. Columbus Circle sits at the southwest corner of the park, just as Belvedere Castle sits at the southwest corner of the old rectangular reservoir. Thus the presence of the city within the park begins to emerge. Is this the plan of a European city that Olmsted envisioned for Manhattan, in his contempt for the grid which covered a once beautiful island: the Paradise Lost of New York?

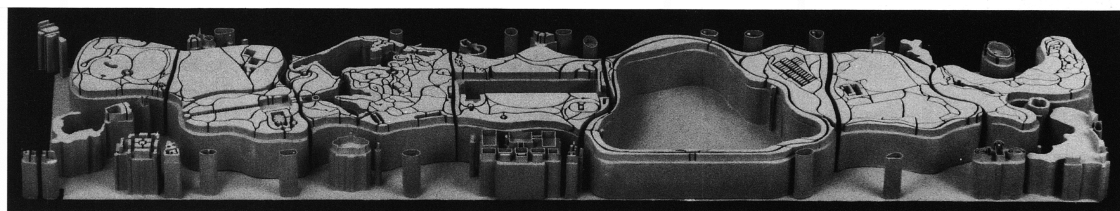


1. Main Drive
2. Five transverse
3. Five major crosstown streets
4. The Grand Promenade
5. Broadway
6. Belvedere Castle (Vista Rock)
7. Columbus Circle
8. The Mall
9. Union Square
10. Bethesda Fountain
11. Madison Square
12. Herald and Greeley Squares
13. Times Square

Manhattan island with Central Park at its centre



Central Park with the rectangular 'reservoir' at its centre



Central Park City

The Central Park City Model

The discovery of this 'lost city' inspired a reconstruction of it according to the structure implied by its ruins. All of the open spaces in the park are raised and become built forms, while the paths and roads, occasionally widening into piazzas, remain at ground level. At the periphery of the core of the park the land drops away, exposing it as an island, with the edge and the towers which stand outside it suggesting the walls of a medieval city. The labyrinthine paths also have a medieval quality, while the overlaid axis of the Grand Promenade recalls ancient Rome, or its revival in the Renaissance.

Placed within the old, rectangular-shaped reservoir of Central Park, this reconstructed city completes the sequence, creating an infinite regress: The natural island was sacred to the Indians. It was subsequently gridded. Within this grid was retained a rectangular

site, Central Park, in order to preserve a small portion of the 'natural' landscape. Within Central Park there was a rectangular reservoir, into which could be inserted the reconstructed 'lost city'. Within this lost city is the rectangular shape of Central Park, into which can be inserted the natural and sacred island of Manhattan. The inwardly spiralling theme of garden-city-garden is finally resolved when the original island is reinstated within the reservoir.

The twentieth-century mind submerged within the three-dimensional grid of the buildings surrounding and overlooking the park observes, with melancholy, the cityscape and landscape of its imagined history and idealized plan.

The Manhattan Model

To explore the implications of superimposing the Grand Promenade plan onto Broadway, a model of Manhattan was built — a three-