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# New Lessons from an Old Park

Gerald Allen  
William Hubbard

Recent restoration projects in New York's Central Park have produced a series of notable designs carried out under the leadership of the Parks Department and Central Park Administrator Elizabeth Barlow. In this work, architects have sensed the original spirit of the park's design and resuscitated it for us all to experience. Careful reconstructions of the Dairy and the Belvedere Castle by James Lamantia and the firm of Russo and Sonder, respectively, are two examples; another is the proposed restoration of the Bethesda Terrace by the Ehrenkrantz Group.

Several designers, however, have been faced with the difficult challenge of making objects that are altogether new to the park, but which might still work the same kinds of magic on us as those by the park's original designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. One example is Richard Oliver's whimsical and altogether charming furniture recently installed in the Dairy. Two other examples, the Cherry Hill Concourse and the new Central Park lamps, were done by our office, and here too the vision of Olmsted and Vaux guided the work. We feel that we have profited a great deal by laboring under the imagined stare of those two eminent Victorians, and we would like to share some of the specific things we think we have learned.

The first thing is not about design, but is a lesson about a way of perceiving the world, a way that contrasts sharply with the logical, deductive methods to which we have become accustomed. All of us—architects as well as people who hire architects—have done rationalized, hard-nosed, bottom-line thinking for so long that we seem somehow to have lost the knack, the attunement, for thinking in any other way. To us, Central Park can come as a revelation, reawakening in us our ability to be inductive, to fashion imaginative, speculative connections not just from scenes in the park, but indeed from all the scenes we may encounter in our daily lives.

A second thing we have learned is about design, a general conception we believe to be valid for all design. To design, we learned, is to choose from what exists—from what may exist physically on a site, or from what exists only in our memories and our imaginations—and to endow those chosen things with the power to set people's minds forth on the paths of wonder and reflection. Olmsted and Vaux sensed this. If having a tree in a certain place would stimulate the imagination, then leaving an old tree in that place would be precisely the same design act as planting a new one. The first is not "preservation" and the second "invention." They are both, equally, design.

This fact continues to suggest something else. In spite of much vocal opinion to the contrary, there may in the end be no true distinction between "traditional" designing and "modern" designing, and that indeed there is only designing itself. To invent something new, to reconstruct something old, or to wrap something new around something old—all can be thought of as being, in essence, the same act because they all are after the same result. They give people the means to fashion coherent connections between this piece of the world they see and other pieces they might remember from the past, or encounter in the future. In turn, this process is analogous to, and in truth a profoundly important part of, the fundamental human quest to find intelligible patterns and meaning in experience.

## Central Park and the Imaginative Mode of Thinking

Central Park consists of 840 acres in the middle of Manhattan Island and was designed in 1858. The design has two major ancestors. The first is English picturesque landscape design, which, in contrast to the geometric, formal arrangement of Italian, French, and other European gardens, attempted to create a semblance of unspoiled nature itself—edited and perfected, to be sure—but still in

its apparent casualness, a picture of what ideal nature might be.

Central Park's other ancestor is of a social character, and it involves what was known in mid-nineteenth century America as the Parks Movement. This was based on an attitude that was fundamentally anti-urban in sentiment, and it held that cities were unhealthy and unnatural places for people to live. In order to be survivable, cities had to have large, open-air parks as an antidote to the stresses of urban life. Central Park became one of these places, the "lungs of New York," as the novelist Henry James once called it.

Olmsted and Vaux were well versed both in the tradition of English picturesque landscape architecture and the ideology of the Parks Movement. Both things, after all, have very deep roots in Anglo-American culture, which has for centuries shown a distinctive, profound, and sometimes schizophrenic suspicion of cities, and indeed of the idea of urbanity itself.

Central Park is a living manifestation of that characteristically Anglo-American mistrust. On the most obvious level, it provides the physical space for New Yorkers to go to for recreation and relaxation. On a much deeper level, it provides a setting to stimulate the imagination. For Olmsted and Vaux, a day in Cen-

tral Park would not just renew our bodies, it would give us new eyes. They noted that we look at a broad stretch of slightly undulating meadow without defined edge..., the imagination, looking into the soft conmingling lights and shadows and fading tints of color of the background, would have encouragement to extend those purely rural conditions indefinitely. No one...could be certain that at a short distance back there are not glades or streams, or that a more open disposition of trees does not prevail.

A landscape like this invites us to ponder, to imagine, to fabricate possibilities for what we see. It invites us not to resolution, to paring down all the possibilities and deciding what a thing *must* be. Rather, landscape invites us to do just the opposite, to entertain all the possibilities of what a thing *might* be.

Olmsted and Vaux knew that as human beings, our spirits have those two complementary tendencies, the urge to winnow down and the desire to speculate. They saw this as the natural human condition, inevitable, and also desirable. And they did not consider speculation the junior partner of the pair, a merely pleasurable respite from the workaday, purposive mode of thought that actually gets things

done. To speculate was a real human need, without which a person would be altogether incomplete, even uncivilized in the full sense of that word.

But they knew that life in a city can be inimical to such thinking (we can't sit and wonder about the things a green light might mean), and so they made Central Park a repository of suggestive landscape scenes that would systematically and conscientiously invite speculation. The park is

not merely the absence of the city, a piece of ground freed of buildings and hustle and bustle. It is a presence of scenes—each shaped just as consciously as any building—to give back to people that imaginative, speculative mode of thinking that city life suppresses. If this lesson of Central Park “takes” on us, we can carry it away from the park, realizing that we do not need a backdrop of nature to make us notice, know, and feel the specific qualities of the world we

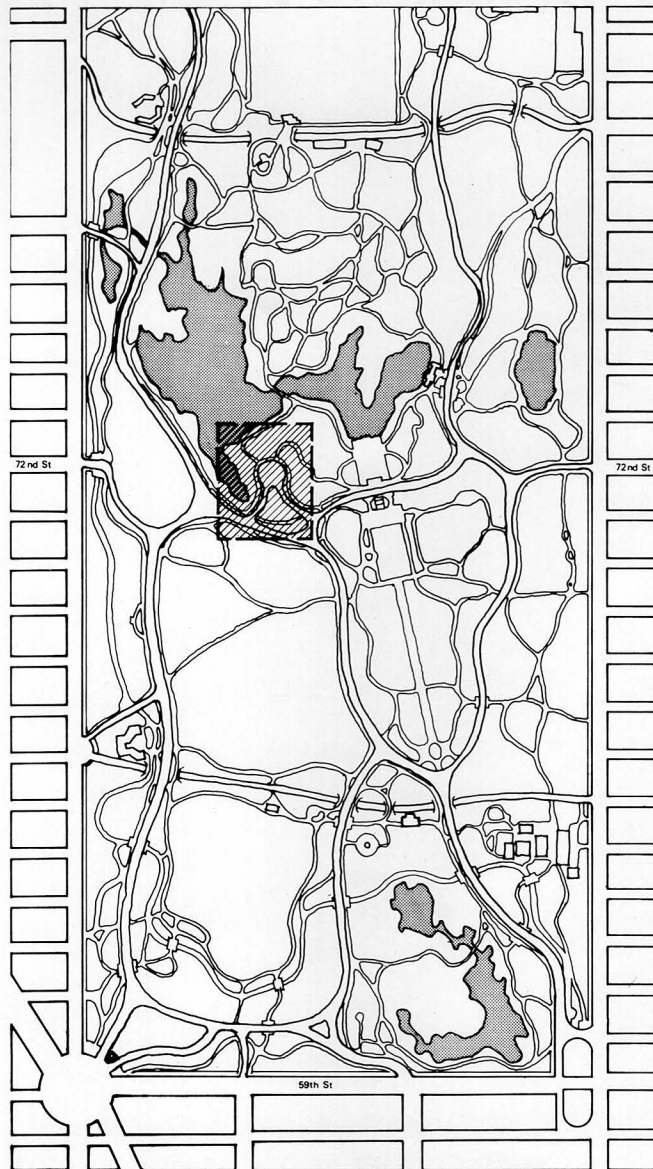
live in. We can do it on our own at any time.

That is why Central Park is today more crucial to the life of the city than ever before. There it is still possible to experience the reflective, affectionate thinking that Olmsted and Vaux intended for us. What remains unfulfilled, though, is the rest of their vision—and of ours: the vision that we can turn that speculative thinking upon everything we build and read out of it an attachment and affection for the places we ordinarily inhabit. We have not lately been designing places like that, and we need to learn anew how to do so.

#### Cherry Hill Concourse

The Cherry Hill Concourse is part restoration and part new design. The original concourse, completed about 1865 under the direction of Olmsted and Vaux, overlooked the newly created lake. At its center was a stone fountain with polychromatic tiles, topped by a bronze finial with bird baths and gas lamps. In recent decades, the finial had disappeared, the fountain had fallen apart, and the concourse had been paved in asphalt and turned into a parking lot.

Our work at Cherry Hill began with the restoration of the fountain, originally erected so that horses drawing pleasure carriages

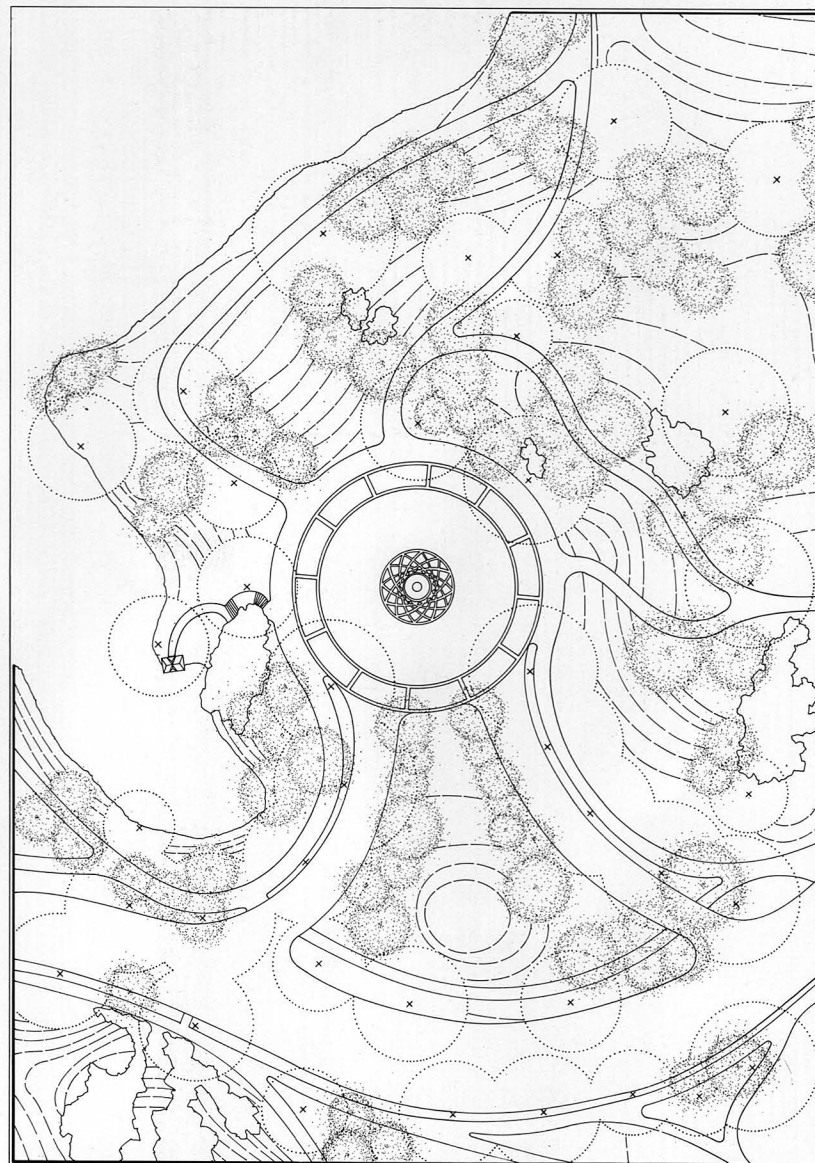


1. Central Park, south end. Cherry Hill is shaded in gray. Drawing: Gerald Allen & Associates.

could be watered without having to leave the park. Now, however, the concourse is used for different things, one being roller skating, and so a new design was called for, not a restoration of the original which had been paved in gravel (Figures 1-4).

A first thing to consider about the new concourse is the way it is approached. We rise up to it or descend along pathways that curve in from the park in a free-flowing, ungeometric manner. As we round any of those curves onto the concourse, our eye is caught by the curved stone ribs that spiral in on the fountain. They seem to catch our movement: we can imagine a swooping spiral line that would carry us into the fountain as smoothly as a whirlpool would carry us to the center. When we walk onto the concourse, we realize that the lines of the ribs keep our eyes in motion: our vision sweeps along the lines of the spirals, and, as it does, it moves around the verges of the concourse, taking in the scene around. We know that the plaza is centered on the fountain, but our eye is kept moving rather than being pinned to that single central point.

Looking closer at the pattern of paving around the fountain, we might be reminded of the paving pattern of the Campidoglio, the Capitoline Hill in Rome. The design, conceived by Michelangelo in the sixteenth



**2. Plan of the Cherry Hill Concourse, designed for Peter L. Gluck and Associates, Architects, by Gerald Allen. Drawing: Edward Kozanlian, Gerald Allen & Associates.**

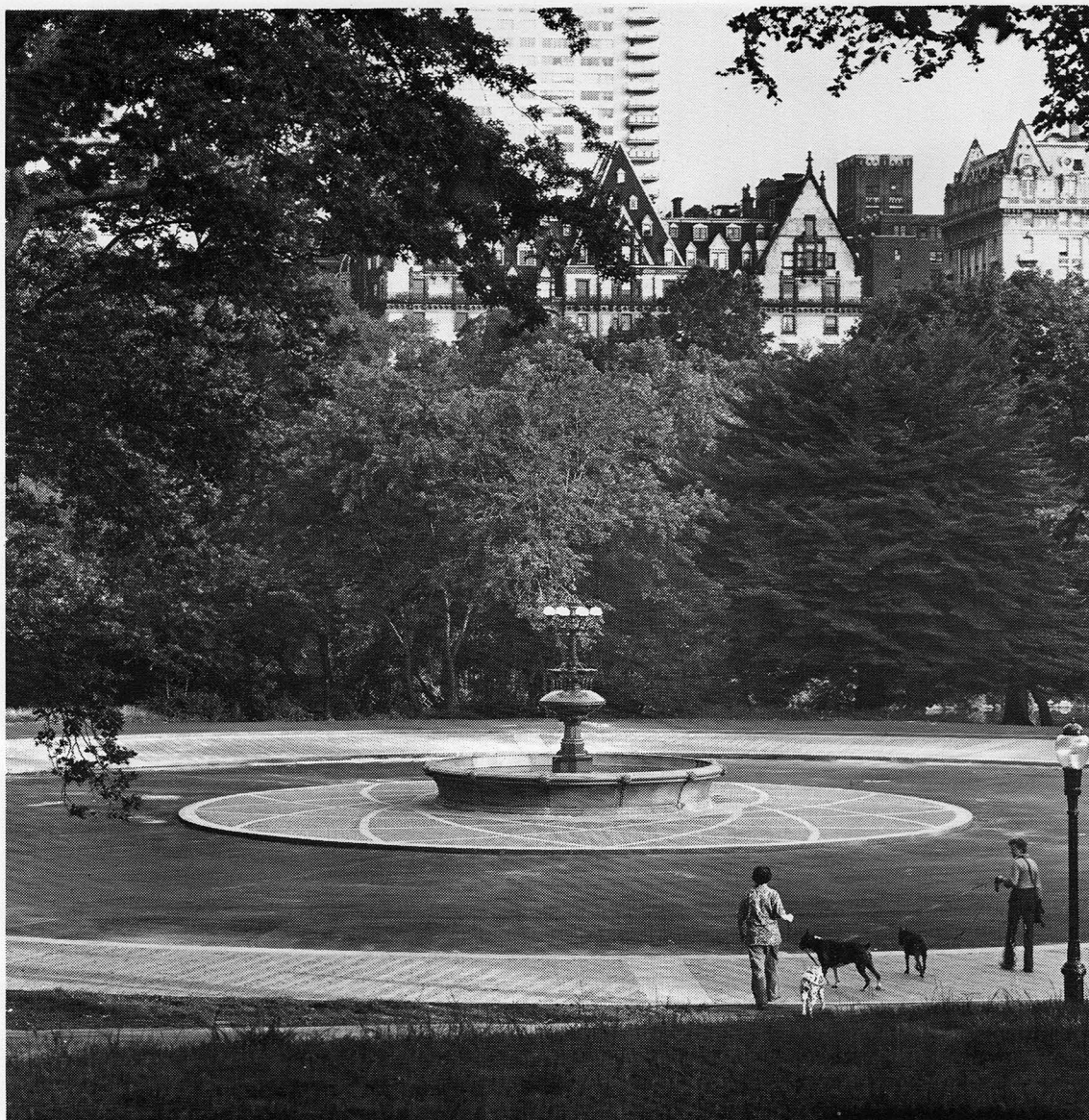
century but not executed until 1940, is one of those images that many of us carry in our heads—put there in some cases by art history courses or travel, by airline brochures or movies. It was this familiarity that suggested the Campidoglio when the new Cherry Hill concourse was being designed. Here would be at least one image that could come into the imaginations of people contemplating the new concourse, and here would be at least one way in which they could

feel that they knew the place a little better.

We also hoped that the concourse would be rich enough to suggest other connectable images: for Italophiles, the domed ceilings of some Baroque churches; for nature-studiers, the spiral pattern in the head of a daisy or sunflower; for almost anyone, those eddies in a kitchen-sink whirlpool. These were connections, by which aspects of the concourse could be felt—other

ways in which people could feel that they knew the concourse and felt at home there. We wanted to insure that the net of comparisons could be cast wide, and that the greatest possible range of images would be caught in it.

We also wanted the concourse to feel specific to Central Park. Thus, even though the Campidoglio was the starting-point, that image was modified to speak the park's language. The concourse paving is not the travertine marble of Rome, but the gray granite and hard brown brick of the Bethesda Terrace nearby. The ribs between the bricks are different: those at Rome are straight, like the buildings around the plaza; at Cherry Hill they are curved, like the pathways leading onto the concourse. The plaza in Rome is an ellipse, elongated like the base of the statue at its center; the concourse is a circle, like the round basin of its central fountain. And the ribs of the Campidoglio curve in to touch a multi-pointed star; at Cherry Hill, the ribs run right into the basin of the Fountain, each rib centered on one of the twelve rosettes on the basin's rim. You might not at first realize that it could only have happened here, but once having sensed its uniqueness, you could, we hope, come to feel an affection for that place as if it were your own.



**3. Cherry Hill Concourse:** The stone basin of the fountain is the restored original; the brick and granite podium and the rest of the paving are new. Photo: Timothy Hursley/Korab.



**4. Cherry Hill Concourse.** The bronze finial is a reproduction of the lost original. Photo: Timothy Hursley/Korab.

### The New Central Park Lamps

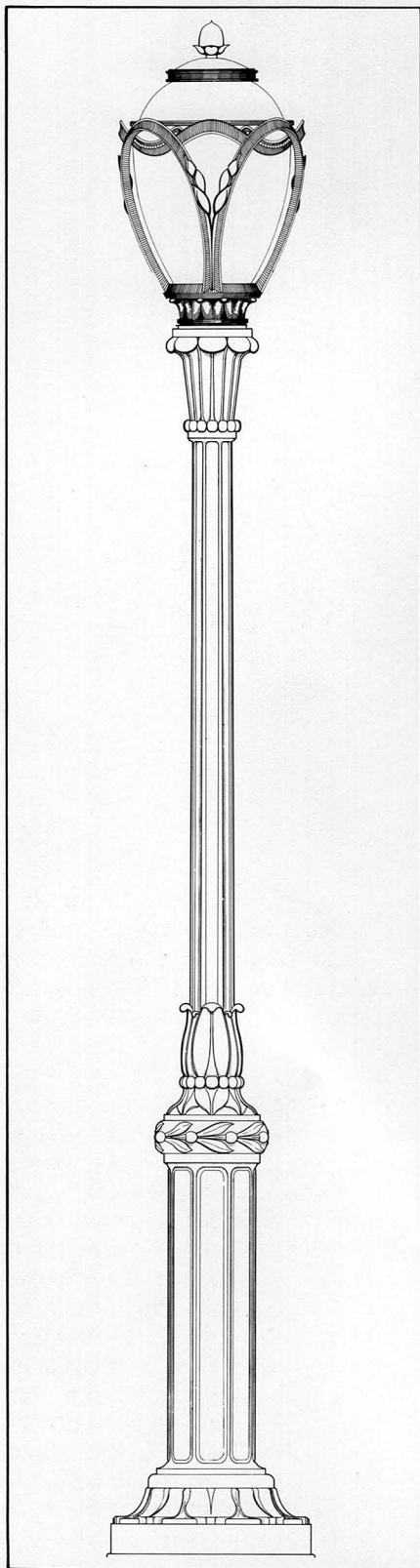
This project consisted of the design, manufacture, and installation of new lamps for the approximately 1,500 cast-iron posts designed for Central Park in 1910 by Henry Bacon, the architect of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. The new lamps had to incorporate current standards for optics and energy efficiency (each of which ruled out a reproduction of Bacon's original lamps). At the same time, they

had to seem fitting, both to the posts and to the park as a whole (which the then-current city standard lamps did not).

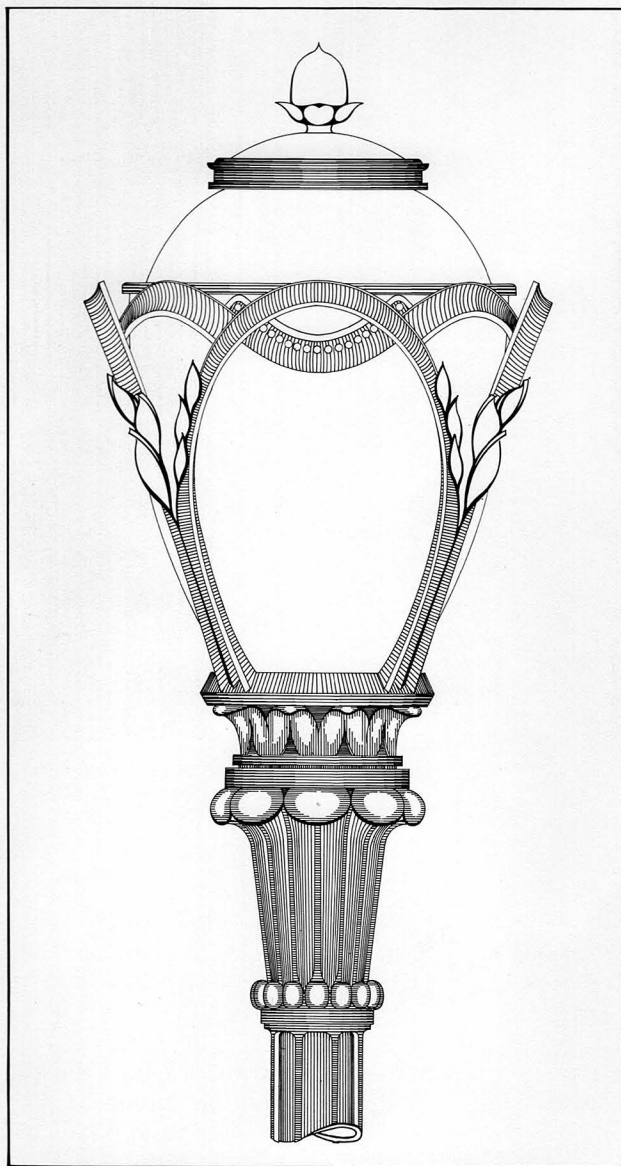
Olmsted and Vaux never intended the Park be lighted, foreseeing that it would be impossible to keep a park safe at night. But by the turn of the century, the city that never sleeps wanted to use the park at night, and so Bacon's lights were installed. As the century wore on, expectations about lighting changed, as did lighting

technology. A succession of new light fixtures were placed atop Bacon's original bases. Each of these fixtures was designed primarily from the standpoint of illumination, and almost all of them looked rather barren atop their decorative bases. So with the renewal of interest in rebuilding the park, one of the jobs at the head of the agenda became the replacement of all the tops with a new state-of-the-art light fixture in a housing compatible with the original bases.

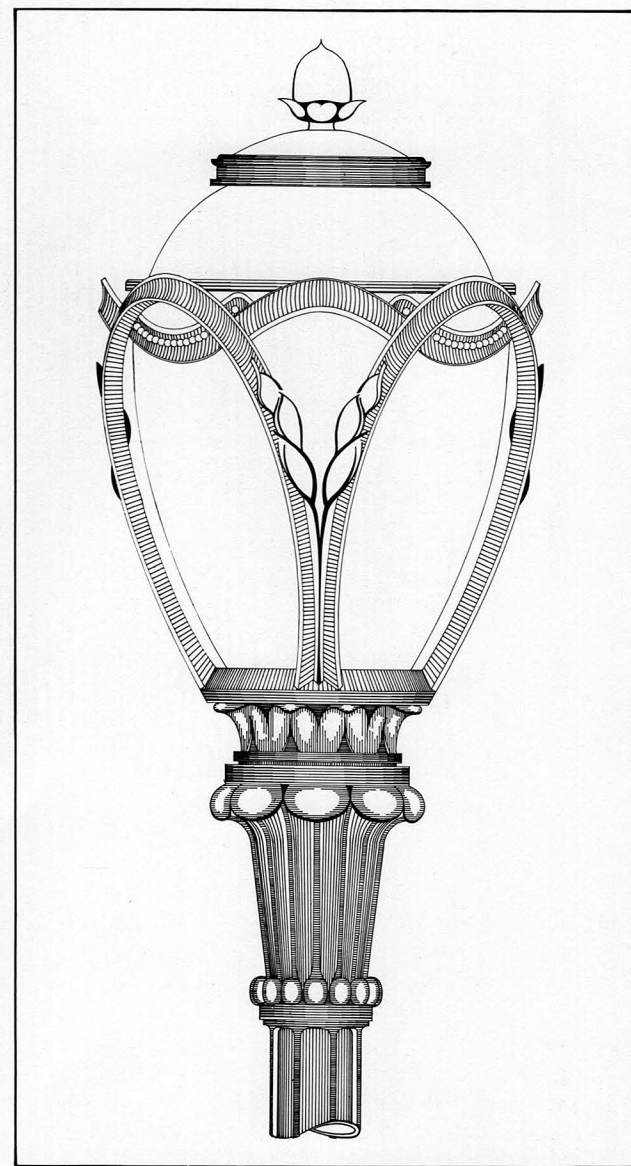
The clue for how to do this came from the original lamp post. Henry Bacon had taken as his model the foot-pedestal-shaft-capital silhouette of the then typical street lamp. But instead of giving it the usual flutes and moldings of classical buildings, he adorned it with forms from botany—leaves, buds, and seeds. He also made the parts of the post seem not so much to be standing on top of each other (like in a building), as growing out of each other (like in plants). It was



5. Elevation of the original Central Park lamp post designed by Henry Bacon in 1910 with the new lamp designed by Gerald Allen and Kent Bloomer. Drawing: Edward Kozanlian, Gerald Allen & Associates.



6. Elevation of the new Central Park lamp. Drawing: Edward Kozanlian, Gerald Allen & Associates.



7. Elevation of the new Central Park lamp. Drawing: Edward Kozanlian, Gerald Allen & Associates.

that botanical analogy that our colleague and collaborator Kent Bloomer seized upon, and which guided the evolution of the design (Figure 5).

From the final bud-like exfoliation of Bacon's capital there now "grows" a new set of leaves, an echo of the original post's capital and a recall-in-reverse of the sprayed leaves that form the foot of the shaft (Figures 6-7). From this ring of leaves spring four elliptical hoops of fluted cross-

section like the shaft, with leaves climbing up their sides. These leaves give the hoops—which otherwise would feel static—a lilt and a look of growing upward. Those hoops are then interlaced by a second, serpentine shape, again fluted but also beaded like other pieces of the shaft. This complex crown lightly holds a domed cap, itself finally adorned by a second cap with an acorn finial.

The new parts of the lamp, no less

than the old ones, hold out to us the suggestion that they are growing upward out of each other. They also do this within a form, the street lamp, that is known to all of us. Its familiar, classical shape invites us to look at similarly molded buildings and think anew about what qualities make them feel solidly stacked-up. Its suggestive, plant-like shapes invite us to look at the real plants nearby and notice the many ways in which their parts grow out of each other. Thus we can weave



8. New Central Park lamp, detail. Photo: Gerald Allen

that net of remembered images, and so feel we know this lamp in detail and with pleasure.

But does the lamp achieve any feeling of specificity to us and to our own age? The botanical ornament and shape make it feel like it was designed for a park, and not for a city street. But could we not, we asked, go beyond that and shape it so that it would feel specific to *us*, to thoughts we carry in our heads today?

As we circle the fixture, the elliptical hoops that cradle the lens alternately open and close: seen diagonally they seem to enfold and cradle the cap; seen face-on they seem to spread and release the cap (Figure 8). In the transition they present the image of a bud opening itself and then closing, opening and closing as if in a time-lapse movie. Thus in this way, too, the new lamp completes the "growing" analogy that was implied by the original post.

Shown this lamp, a person of the turn of the century simply would not have seen a bud opening and closing. But we can see it, and we do so without difficulty, and with nothing more than the normal mental equipment that living in the modern world has given us.

If the word "modern" has any meaning—if "modern" is not just a collection of stylistic conventions but means "speaking to thoughts that are specific to our age"—if "modern" means that, then these lamps are modern even though cloaked in shapes we might call traditional. Indeed what the lamps can show us is that there is really no true distinction between modern shapes and traditional shapes. That distinction arose only when Modernism convinced us that there had been a decisive break in history between the present age and all that had come before, and that there was a catalog of shapes for previous ages but that only a new

What makes this specific, and specific to us in the late twentieth century, is a manner in which this has been done.

One of the lessons which Cubism, that galvanizing movement of Modern art, tried to teach us was that three-dimensional objects can present radically different appearances as we move about them. This lesson, now some seventy years old, has been so thoroughly learned by us that it forms part of our perception, part of the way we see the world around us. Equally a part of the way we see things is time-lapse photography. The image of a flower opening and closing as we watch is so much a part of our visual inventory that we hardly realize that the image did not exist only a few decades ago.

And that is precisely the point: time-lapse photography, and indeed Cubism, are perceptions that are specific to our age.



9. New Central Park lamp, night view. Photo: Timothy Hursley/Korab.

catalog was appropriate for this age. These lamps show us that, in the end, there is really only one catalog, that Modernism's break in history was only apparent and not real.

In speaking of design in this way, there is no need—indeed, there is really no place—for the terms "Modern" or "traditional," and that is the final lesson of working in Central Park. Olmsted and Vaux also had no need for those terms. They saw no break in history, no gulf dividing their age from the ages that preceded it. For them—and now, again, for us—all of our history is available for inclusion in a wide-cast net of affectionate connections. The lesson of Central Park is that the designer's field of maneuver can be as wide as the mind of his viewer. It is, and must be, the field of memory and the field of imagination (Figure 9).