

The Manhattan Model

dimensional version of the drawing that juxtaposes Central Park and Manhattan. This model revealed qualities which might otherwise have remained invisible. The grey undulations of the buildings resemble the contours of a natural landscape, reminding us of what the island might have looked like before the road grid was built. Thereafter, each plot of land retained its natural features until it was bought and levelled to make way for a building. There is also an interesting correspondence between the landscape and the cityscape, because the composition of the substratum determines the maximum height of building which can be supported by it.

This is not an entirely abstract notion. Standing on top of the World Trade Center at dusk or dawn, with squinted eyes it is possible to see the cityscape as a more or less continuous mass, an abstract landscape. Similarly, a view from across the river gives the impression of a cohesive form, a self-contained city. With a river separating it from the adjacent land, Manhattan appears to be a castle surrounded by a moat. Often the nucleus of the medieval city was a castle, and therefore the castle can also be seen as a microcosm of the city — an ideal city. Similarly, New York, an inwardly turning city, can be seen as a fortified city, and Central Park, with the tall buildings surrounding it, as a walled medieval garden. In referring to the island of Manhattan it has become impossible not to refer simultaneously to the island in the Park. These can perhaps be seen as the earthly city and the heavenly city, respectively, analogous to hell and heaven. Thus Central Park can also be described as a sacred space, analogous to a church, which can be seen as an earthly embodiment of the heavenly city.²⁰

During the day, Central Park represents an oasis in the midst of a city which is driven by the struggle for survival. At night it becomes a hell. Umberto Eco compares Manhattan and Central Park to a medieval town surrounded by woods in which 'a wanderer . . . at night saw them peopled with maleficent presences; one did not lightly venture beyond the town; men went armed. This condition is close to that of the white middle-class inhabitant of New York, who doesn't set foot in Central Park after five in the afternoon.'²¹ Both sacred space and infernal space, Central Park has as many facets as the city it mirrors.

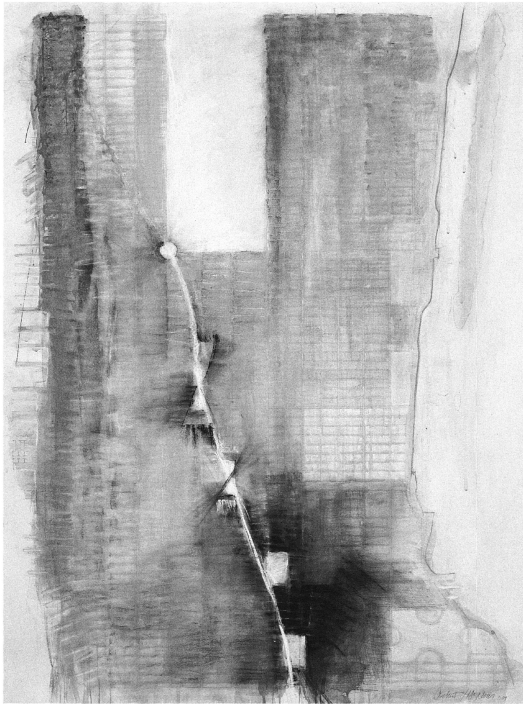
The five-foot-long architectural model of Manhattan cuts a hauntingly anthropomorphic figure, with a womb at its centre — the replenishing space of Central Park, symbolizing the sacred spaces in which life is nurtured and springs forth. Is this gridded island the caged corpse of a landscape betrayed? Is New York haunted by the death of the spirit of this island? Do New Yorkers inhabit a violated landscape — the garden of earthly delights?

Urban Design in Manhattan

In theory the decision to place Central Park in the centre of the island as a relief from the grid seemed a good one; in practice it is frequented mostly by the people who live within a few blocks of it. Richard Sennett writes:

Whenever Americans of the era of high capitalism thought of an alternative to the grid, they thought of bucolic relief, such as a leafy park or a promenade, rather than a more arousing street, square, or center in which to experience the complex life of the city. The nineteenth-century construction of Central Park in New York is perhaps the most bitter example of this alternative, an artfully designed natural void planned for the city's center in expectation that the cultivated, charming territory already established around it — as bucolic and refreshing a scene as any city-dweller could wish for within a few minutes drive from his house — would be razed to the ground by the encroachments of the grid.²²

Can the discovery of the plan of New York embedded within Central Park inform the design of the city in a real and tangible way? The model of Manhattan represents a visionary approach to



Plan of Manhattan showing the five 'squares' along Broadway.
Painting by Lorna McNeur and Kimberly Ackert, 1986.

this question. A more realistic approach might be to reinstate Broadway as the Grand Promenade of New York City.

Five triangular plots of land are created by the intersections between Broadway, the avenues and the major crosstown streets. With rare exceptions such as the Flatiron Building at Madison Square, they have not been regarded as desirable sites on which to build, and have therefore been allowed to fall into disrepair, becoming a haven for the homeless.

During the past twelve years these 'squares' have been the subject of design investigations carried out by myself and interested colleagues and students. A selection of these projects is illustrated on the following pages. In addition to exploring the potential of such spaces to enliven journeys through the City, they reflect the conviction that an awareness of the historical inhabitation of each place is essential to the creation of an appropriate design. As Richard Sennett has written, 'rather than copying the forms of the past, we need to understand the principles of their inventiveness.'²³

Notes

1. Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (London, 1990), p. 60.
2. Joseph Rykwert, *The Necessity of Artifice* (New York, 1982), p. 133.
3. *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted. Vol. III: Creating Central Park, 1857-1861*, edited by Charles Capen McLaughlin (Baltimore, Maryland, 1983), pp. 212-13.
4. For more information on this subject, see William A. McClung, *The Architecture of Paradise* (Berkeley, California, 1983).
5. Olmsted described the design of the Park in the 'Greensward' document of 1858, from which many of the quotations in this article were taken. See *Creating Central Park*, op. cit.

6. *Creating Central Park*, op. cit. pp. 121-2.
7. *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Central Park*, Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., edited by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimbell (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), p. 378. In the section of the Greensward document entitled 'The System of Walks and Rides', Olmsted explains that 'it must be necessary to lay out all the principal drives, rides, and walks of the Park in lines having a continuous northerly and southerly course, nearly parallel with each other and with the avenues of the city.'
8. *Creating Central Park*, op. cit. p. 121.
9. *Ibid.*
10. For a description of these various landscapes, see *Creating Central Park* pp. 119-51, and also pp. 204-19 in the section 'Description of Central Park'.
11. *Creating Central Park*, op. cit. p. 125.
12. The metaphorical relationships between the house, the city and the garden are discussed by Plato, Vitruvius, and Alberti, among others. Plato draws an analogy between the city and the house: 'If men are to have a city wall at all, the private houses should be constructed right from the foundation so that the whole city forms in effect a single wall: . . . a whole city looking like a single house will be quite a pretty sight.' (*The Laws*, VI, 779, translated by Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 260.) Alberti's conception of the city as a great house, and of the villa as a miniature city, may have been influenced by this analogy. He not only draws an analogy between the city and the house, but extends it to include outdoor spaces which are extensions of the interior organization of the house: 'for if a City, according to the Opinion of Philosophers, be no more than a great House and, on the other Hand, a House be a little City; why may it not be said, that the Members of that House are so many little Houses; such as the Court-yard, the Hall, the Parlour, the Portico, and the like?'. (*On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, edited by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, Robert Tavenor (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).
13. *Creating Central Park*, op. cit. p. 126.
14. The 72nd Street transverse is the only one that was not lowered, in order to allow it to engage with the 'mansion' design, as a carriage entrance.
15. A description of a seventeenth-century English country house in Ralph Dutton's *The English Garden* (London, 1937) corresponds quite closely with Olmsted's conception: 'In these shady paths, arbors would be formed containing wooden seats, since the pleasure of walking and resting in the garden was fully appreciated at this period. To one side of the mansion would be the bowling green, the turf kept as smooth and close as the roller and scythe could make it, while out of the immediate site of the main windows of the house, beyond the alleys, would be the kitchen garden, probably surrounded by a wall.'
16. For more information on this subject, see S. B. Johnson, *The Roof Gardens of Broadway Theatres 1883-1942* (1985); F. Sheppard, *Broadway, from the Battery to the Bronx* (1988); Bayrd Still, *Mirror for Gotham* (1978).
17. Charles Lockwood, *Manhattan Moves Uptown* (Boston, 1976), p. 125.
18. *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture*, op. cit. p. 188. This desire to counteract the effects of city life by visiting the country is discussed by David Coffin (with reference to Pliny) in *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome* (Princeton, N. J., 1979), chapter 1.
19. This passage describing the Katsura Imperial Palace in Kyoto precisely describes the scale of Central Park (my italics). See Susan and Geoffrey Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man* (New York, 1975), p. 92.
20. The church is perceived as the heavenly city because within its walls are contained the shrines (the adiculae, or 'little buildings') of the multitude of prophets, saints, martyrs, etc.; the members of the heavenly family who are the populace of the church as the heavenly city on earth. See John Summerson's essay 'Heavenly Mansions' in his *Heavenly Mansions and Other Essays* (London, 1949).
21. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality* (London, 1986), p. 79.
22. *The Conscience of the Eye*, op. cit. p. 56.
23. *Ibid.* p. 176.

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The plans of Manhattan and Central Park on p. 67 were drawn by Lorna McNeur in 1983, with the assistance of Claude Charron, Christina Viviani and Peter Klambauer. The model of Central Park City (two and a half feet long) on p. 67 was made by Lorna McNeur in 1979/80. The model of Manhattan (five feet long) on p. 68 was made by Lorna McNeur in 1983, with the assistance of Claude Charron, Christina Viviani, Peter Klambauer and Torben Burns, and photographed by Ray Chalmers. The plan-painting of Manhattan on this page was photographed by Stephen Hillyer.

AA files

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