

*New York City's Central Park:  
Beautiful & Kind*

By Dale Laurin, RA



# *Part I*

- Oneness and Manyness, Unity and Variety

Central Park, whose 150th anniversary was celebrated in 2003, is the first public park in America and one of the most beautiful. It is loved and enjoyed by millions of people every year.



Where else can you spend a day doing everything from playing ball...



to hearing an impromptu concert,



seeing and smelling flowers Shakespeare wrote about,



riding a carousel,



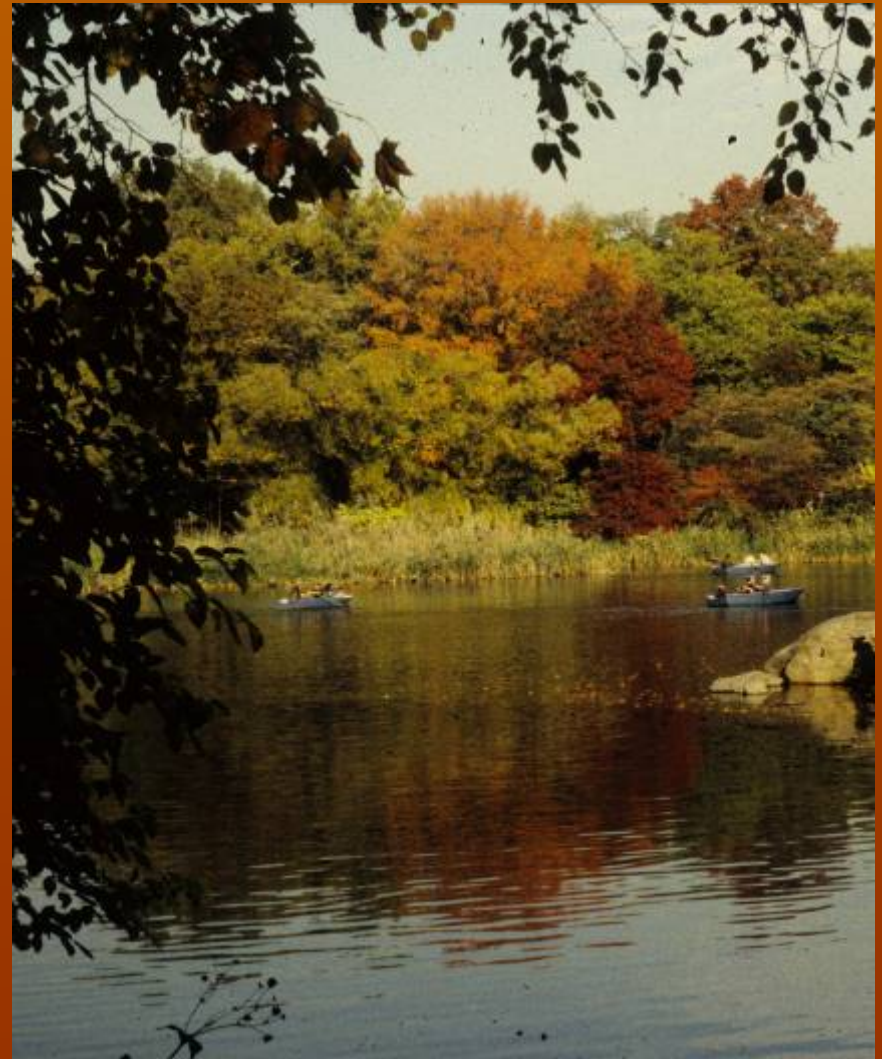
picnicking,



looking at an obelisk from  
ancient Egypt,



rowing a boat across a lake whose  
surface reflects trees, clouds and  
skyscrapers,



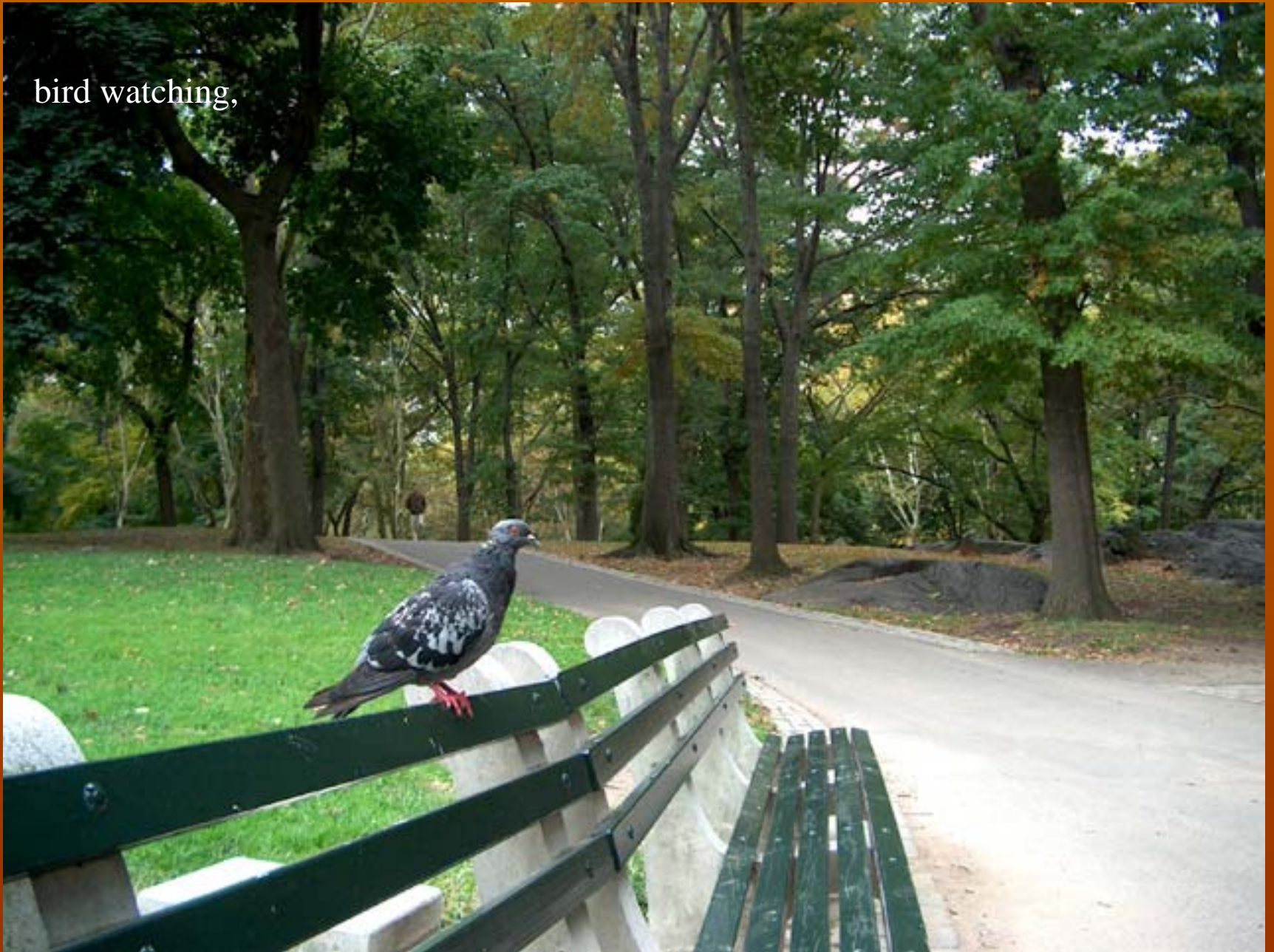
climbing rugged hills



or a life-size sculpture of characters from Alice in Wonderland,



bird watching,



exploring a castle,



then lounging in the grass—



all a subway ride away, and all for free?

I see Central Park, in its unity and variety, as an important work of art. It illustrates the principle which is at the basis of my work as an architect, stated by Eli Siegel, the founder of Aesthetic Realism:

“All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.”

In this talk, I’ll show that the way this park puts reality’s opposites together is beautiful the way a painting or piece of music is beautiful—and further, that through the knowledge of Aesthetic Realism, it can be useful to our very lives.

# *Oneness and Manyness, Unity and Variety*

In his 15 Questions, “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?” Mr. Siegel asks:

Is there in every work of art something which shows reality as one and also something which shows reality as many and diverse?—must every work of art have a simultaneous presence of oneness and manyness, unity and variety?

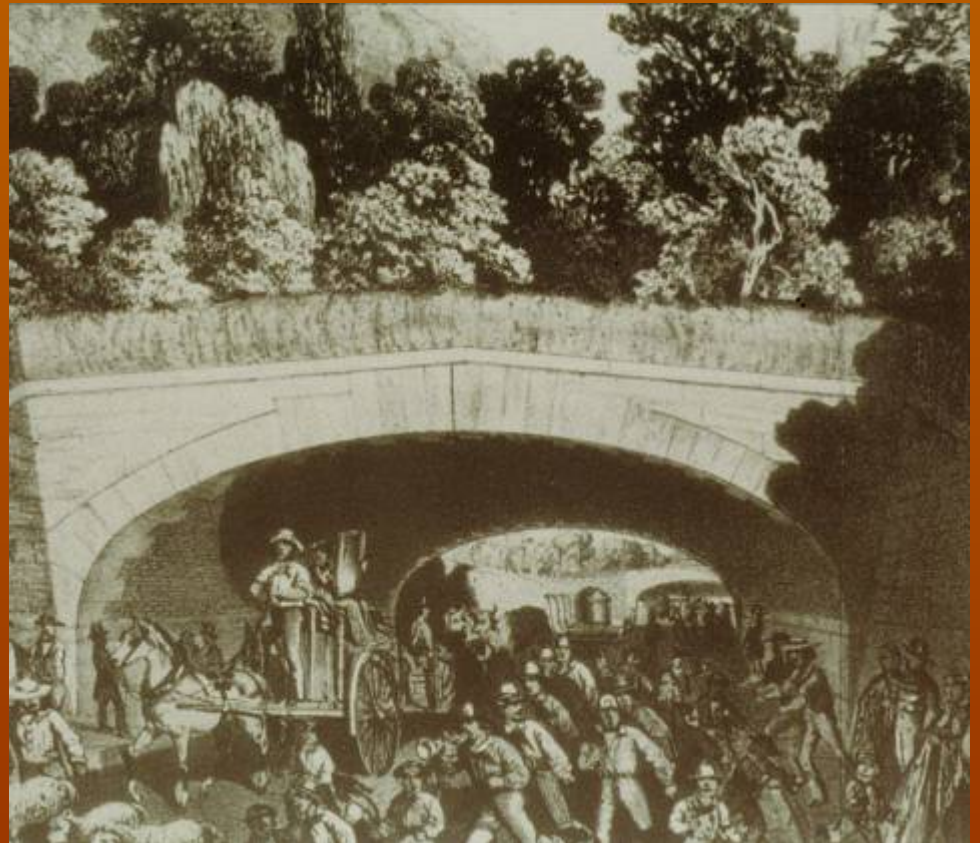
Just as these opposites were fundamental to the democratic foundation of our country, as stated in the Latin motto: “*E Pluribus Unum*”—“from many, one,” they were fundamental to the original vision of a “central park” for New York City had by its designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. As Olmsted explained, Central Park was to have “all classes largely represented, with a common purpose, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each.”

In the mid-1800s, most New Yorkers labored long, hard hours, lived in crowded, stifling tenement houses, and unlike the rich, couldn’t afford the time or money to vacation in the country. The park designers sought to create a feeling of the country in the city, a place where workers and their families could come to refresh their bodies and minds. Their tremendous achievement is that the park they created encourages this kind purpose through its thoughtful design—and centrally through the way it puts together oneness and manyness.

A seemingly insurmountable obstacle facing the designers was the fact that city officials stipulated that the two-and-a-half mile long tract of land they assembled would have to be subdivided by four cross-streets to allow horse-and buggy traffic to cross east and west unimpeded. These streets—67th, 79th, 86th, and 96th—would have, in effect, made for five small parks, not one large park with the rural feeling the designers wanted, and for park-goers, getting from one parcel to another would have been hazardous.



But Vaux and Olmsted came up with the greatly imaginative idea of ramping the streets below the level of the park, and placing park roadways and paths atop wide bridges planted with abundant trees, shrubs and plants. They wanted to make the cross streets scarcely noticeable to park goers, creating the feeling of one, unified park arising from the five sections, enabling people to freely traverse unimpeded from 59th St. all the way to 110th, if they liked.





And they succeeded!—after 150 years of growth, the vegetation hides the roads so well, you can be unaware that cars and taxis are actually speeding by a few yards away.

The park itself is composed of many distinct parts, each with its own unique character, yet these flow into one another with no distinct boundaries. For example, starting at the south east corner of the park, you can stroll around the rustic Pond,

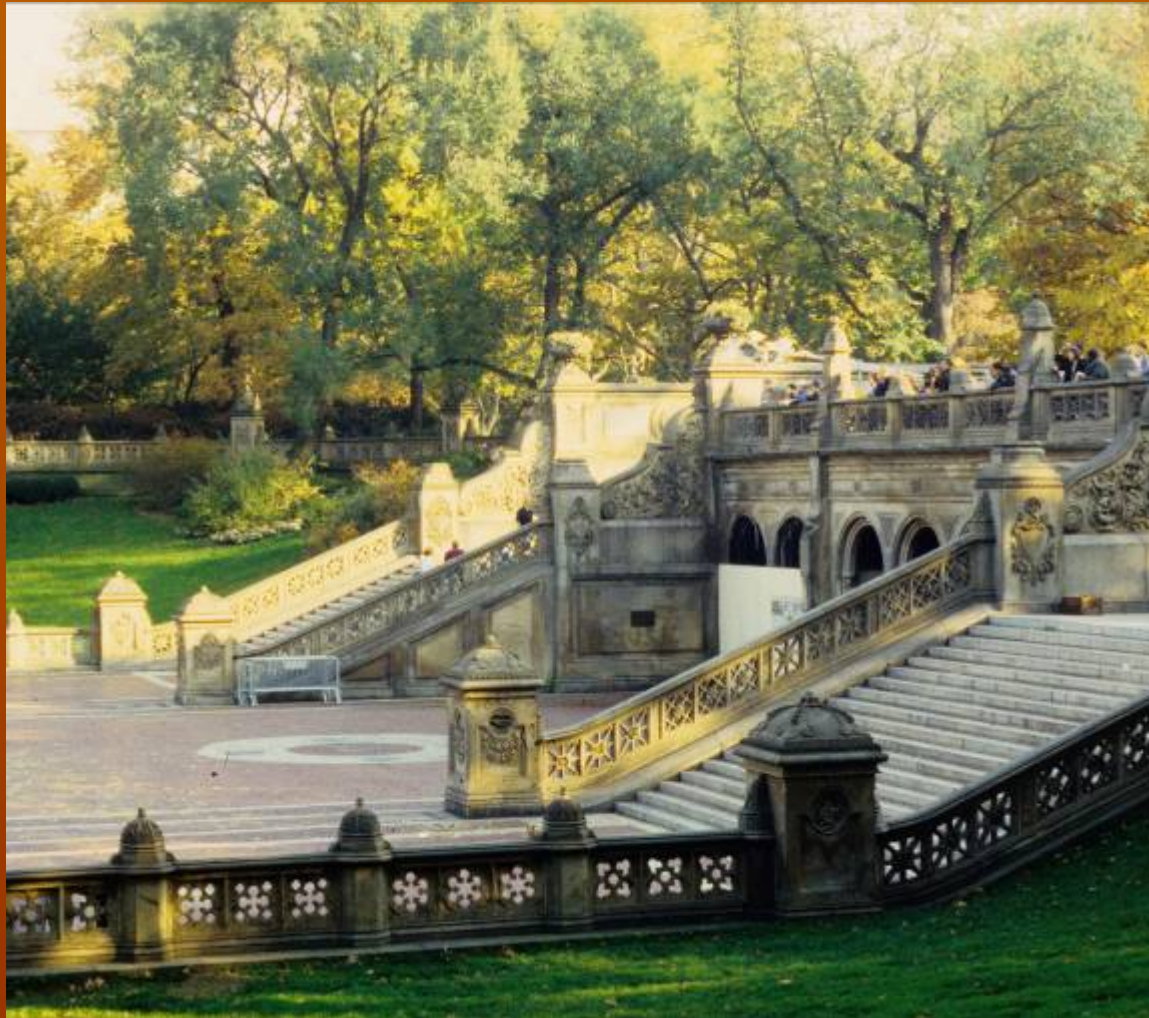


promenade the length of the stately Mall under towering elms,



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descend the grand staircase at the elegant Bethesda Terrace,



cross the boat-busy lake atop Bow Bridge,



skirt the wild, thickly wooded Ramble,



pass the sunny, expansive Great Lawn,



circle around the Reservoir,



cross the North Meadow to the formal conservatory Gardens,



and end at the bucolic Harlem Meer in the northeast corner!



Yet with all this variety you feel it's a continuous experience—with every element adding to the next and all contained within one large, neat, 843-acre rectangle, right in the middle of America's largest metropolis.



The opposites of oneness and manyness, unity and variety that Central Park puts together so well correspond to what every person wants to feel, something I was fortunate to learn about in an Aesthetic Realism lesson I had with Mr. Siegel in 1978. Like most people, there were many different things going on in my life, with little sense of coherence among them. I was a son, a brother, a roommate, I was an architect and a trustee at the church I attended, I cared for music, particularly Beethoven, and I had just begun to date a young woman, Barbara Buehler, whom I'm happy to say has been my wife now for 25 years.

Mr. Siegel asked me this surprising question: “What relation do you think Beethoven has to architecture?” Other than the fact music and architecture were both arts, I could think of no relation. “Do you think that every composition in music is in a sense a construction?” “Yes, there's something organized.” “And do you think that's present in yourself?” I didn't think so.

“The large thing in organization is many things working as one. Do you believe right now all of your body is working as one? There's a relation between your toes and your eyes?...also between your fingers and your toes?” “Yes”.

As I continued my study of Aesthetic Realism, I saw that what has a person feel truly composed and unified is using the different aspects of our lives for one purpose—our largest purpose, which Aesthetic Realism explains is to like the world.

With all its confusion and injustice, the world CAN honestly be liked, I learned, because it has an aesthetic structure. The fact that everything is composed of opposites—like oneness and manyness, rest and motion, hardness and softness, inside and outside—means that we are not only different from everyone else—as I had felt; we are also the related.

The way the various elements of Central Park add to each other then, shows how we want to be and how we need to see people different from ourselves—with the respect and kindness they deserve.

[Click here for Part Two](#)