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

By Dale Laurin, RA

## Part III

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## Sameness and Change; Firmness and Flexibility

Many people think that Central Park is largely natural, that—as the famous New York Journalist Horace Greeley said on seeing it for the first time: "It's good they left it alone."

But if Vaux and Olmsted had left the land north of 59th St. as they found it,

#### instead of this vista,



we would have this.



Hard as it is to believe, Central Park is more a work of art than a product of "mother nature," and one that called for tremendous effort and made for tremendous change.

In his role as construction superintendent, Olmsted mobilized a workforce that numbered hundreds of men, clearing away refuge dumps, dredging swamps, moving tons of earth and rock, excavating—not only for the submerged cross-streets—but for miles of drainage pipe, filling in and preparing the soil, building bridges and park structures, laying down pathways and roads, and planting thousands of trees, shrubs, and plants on this largely barren site—and all according to the Greensward plan.



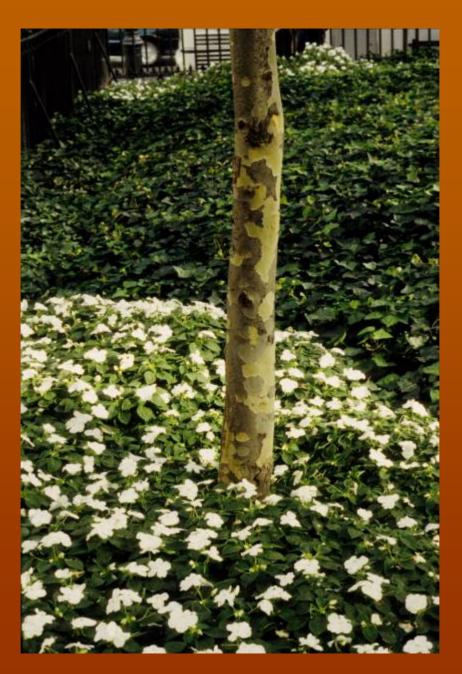
However, the designers didn't arrogantly change everything. They carefully studied and worked with the topography and existing elements of the site, leaving—for instance—many of the magnificent rock outcroppings and rugged terrain intact, as natural features.



Simultaneously, they softened the effect of the rocks through introducing lakes and ponds, meandering walks,



a rich variety of plantings, much of which was planned by the renowned Austrian landscape designer Ignaz Pilat.



The result is what Mr. Siegel called a "planned wilderness" that is both natural and urbane, rugged and people-friendly at once.



### Friendship, Based on Kindness and Criticism, Saves the Park



Central Park was an immediate, popular success, yet from its inception Vaux and Olmsted had to fight against politicians, budget cuts, and demands for changes that threatened the integrity and kindness of the park, including proposals to:

- 1. Eliminate the expensive excavation work needed to lower the cross-town roads,
- 2. Close the dairy Vaux had designed where poor children got milk and toys to play with, and convert it into a money-making restaurant,
- 3. Allow the construction of mansions on the park side of 5th Ave., a horse-racing track, and even a world's fair!

Tired of fighting these demands of the rich and powerful, and unwilling to compromise further, the partners finally resigned their positions in 1863.

While Vaux pursued other commissions, his passion about the welfare of the Park, to which he once said, "I devoted the very heart of my life," never dimmed.

How hurt he was then whenever Olmsted—who had been more in the public eye as park superintendent, but who was now managing a failing gold mine operation in California—was given sole credit for its design.

Then in 1866 Vaux got a great opportunity to shine. His ideas were sought for a new park being planned for Brooklyn, and what he proposed was brilliant. But rather than try to show up his former partner, he recalled how well they had worked together, bringing out good things in each other for the benefit of Central Park, and he encouraged him to return and renew their partnership. Olmsted, wary after his Central Park experience, was very hesitant. But Vaux didn't give up. His persistence is a moving illustration of what it means to be kind, as Eli Siegel explains in his work *Definitions and Comment: Being a Description of the World:* 

Kindness is that in a self which wants other things to be rightly pleased.

The word *rightly* here is important. I used to tell myself that I was kind when I gave compliments or flattered people, or just agreed with them even if I hadn't paid attention to what they said. Meanwhile, the crucial matter of really trying to *know* another person, being interested in how they see other people and things, what is affecting them, and what would have them "most rightly pleased"—was simply not in my mind. Like most people I was too busy thinking about myself. This, I learned, isn't kindness; it's contempt, which Mr. Siegel once described as "the difference between what something deserves and what we choose to give." And he writes further in his definition of kindness:

To be kind is honestly to think of what another person, or other persons, truly desire. If we do not take the trouble to find this out, or do not want to take the trouble, our "kindness" is so much not kindness.

I'm very grateful to Aesthetic Realism for what I've learned on this subject, including the crucial fact that one of the kindest things one person can do for another is to be critical of that in a person that weakens him or her. I think this is what was impelling Calvert Vaux to write letter after letter to his friend Frederick Law Olmsted, urging him to return to New York and to the best thing in him—his desire to shape the earth for the good of the people.

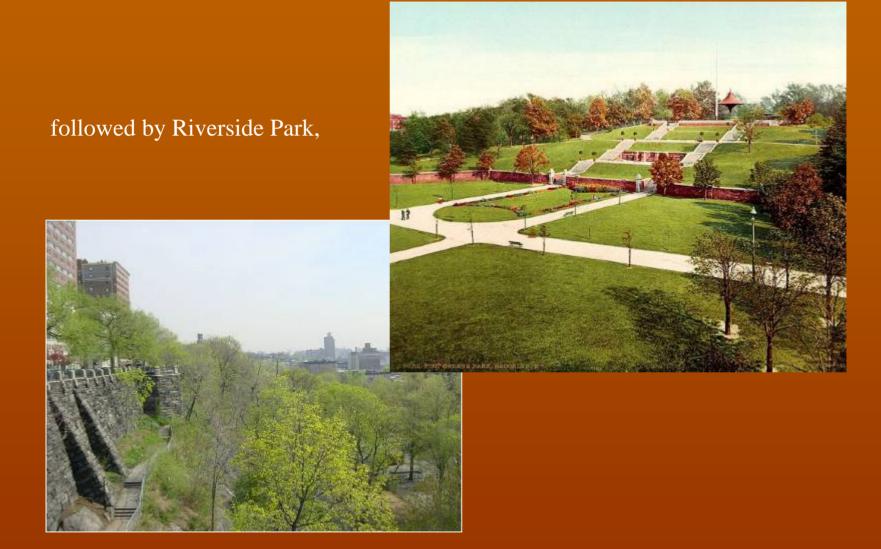
#### In one letter he wrote:

For us to be the means of elevating an unaccredited but important pursuit seems to me a direct contribution to the best interests of humanity, [a task that is] possible together, impossible alone...I feel that it will be a burning shame and a reprehensible mistake on our part if...Central Park slips up as a confused jumble of which there is nothing quotable as precedent that will help our successors.

His criticism worked. In August 1866, Olmsted returned to renew his partnership with Vaux, and together they designed the park now recognized as a masterpiece of urban park design,

#### Prospect Park in Brooklyn,





Morningside Park, Fort Greene Park—among some dozen others, and Central Park itself, on which they worked in various capacities for the rest of Vaux's life.

Said Olmsted years later, "Were it not for his invitation, I should have been a farmer."

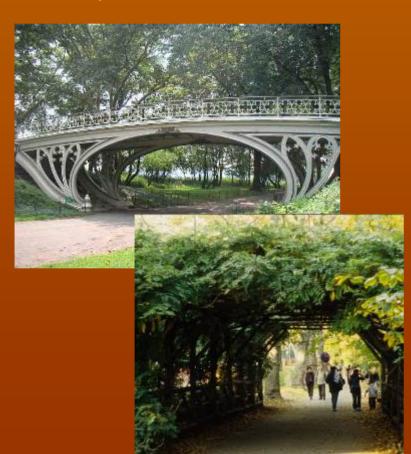


## The Structures of Central Park: Assertive and Yielding

A common mistake people make is to feel it's weak yielding to other people and things—that to take care of yourself you have to be assertive, have your way. In doing so, however, we often feel mean and cold—I certainly did—and we long to be more yielding, more deeply affected by the outside world. But as Mr. Siegel writes in a passage from *Self and World* I quoted from earlier, the artist shows these opposites don't have to fight:

Through merging with things, the artist has deeply been controlled by them. He has come to power by undergoing the might of things and giving them form through his personality.

Providing rich evidence for this are the dozens of imaginatively designed bridges, arbors, and pavilions that Calvert Vaux designed throughout Central Park. These structures don't assert themselves or the architect's ego in competition with their natural surroundings, but rather seem inspired by them, thus joining beautifully with the landscape as if they had always been there:

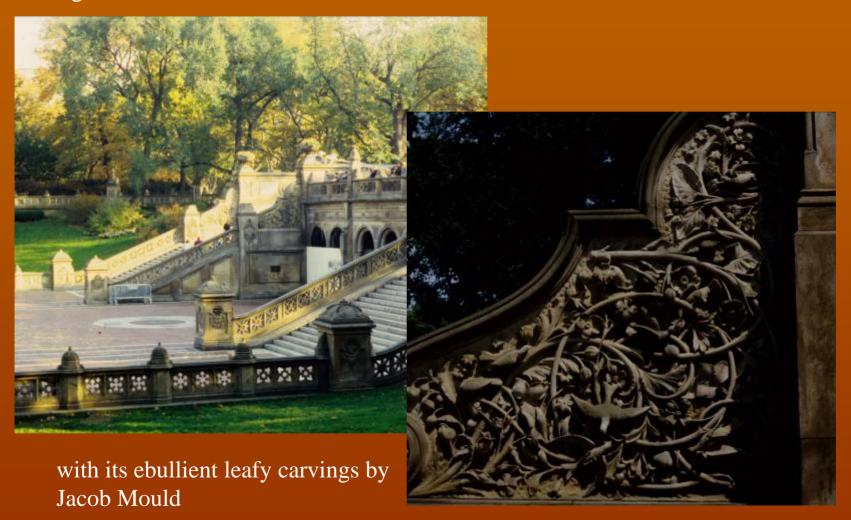




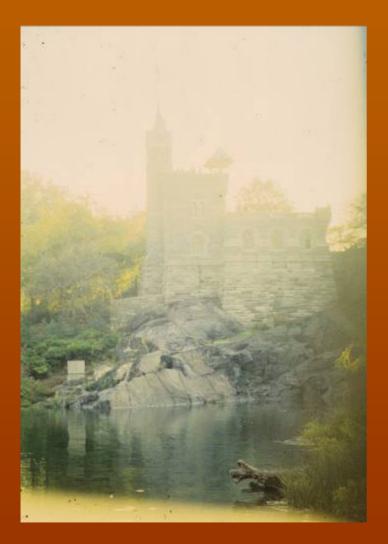
### from this charming rustic bridge



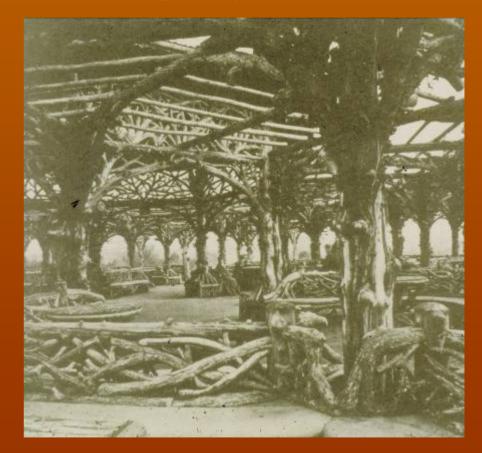
#### to the grandeur of the Terrace



from Belvedere Castle that seems to rise out of the rock,



to this whimsical branch-like shelter where children once played games,



to Vaux's masterpiece, the sublime Bow Bridge.



See how low and lovingly it hugs the earth even as it effortlessly leaps across the lake like the most graceful deer—strong, dignified, and proud in its relation to the world that is around it and—through that arching line of circular, sun-dappled openings—within it.



Through "undergoing the might of things," Vaux got to his most powerful expression, which is all the greater for its simple eloquence.



Central Park will surely continue to attract New Yorkers and visitors from around the world for the next 150 years and more. And while many will seek its fields, flowers, and lakes as an idyllic retreat from office pressures and crowded, noisy streets, the park's crags and thorns and reflections of office towers in its lakes should remind us that Central Park is a part OF—not apart FROM—the rest of the world, and related to everything through the opposites. I think Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted would want their creation to be a means of people seeing *all* reality more accurately and kindly, something Aesthetic Realism now makes possible. This will truly add, as Olmsted wrote, "to the pleasure of all" and "the greater happiness of each."





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

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