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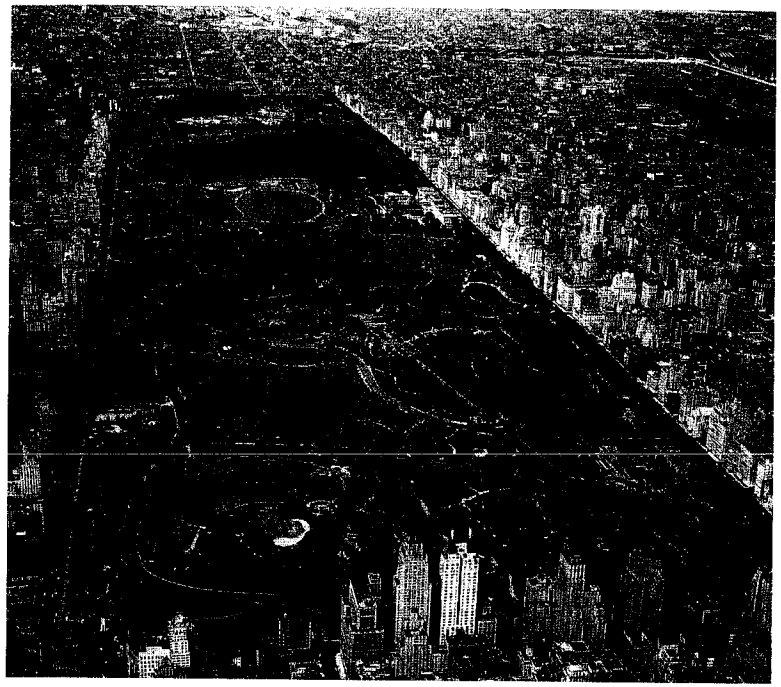
Symbolic Order and the Urban Pastoral

> The supply of the city with pure water was the noblest labor; the gift of its great lungs, or breathing-place, the next.
>
> —*Henry Cleaveland*[1]

> To conceive of New York without the park is to imagine the intolerable.
>
> —*John Reps*[2]

An 843-acre strip of nature cuts through the heart of Manhattan Island. This is Central Park, widely considered to be the most important public space created in nineteenth-century America. The quiet northern edge of the park borders Harlem just a few blocks away from the abandoned and burnt-out lots which serve as a poignant reminder of the severity of postwar urban decline. At the southern end of the park we enter a different world: tourists and yellow taxis swarm around the upmarket shops and restaurants spreading south from Columbus Circle and Grand Army Plaza into the heart of the midtown business district. This streak of green connects two different worlds into a symbolic whole where the innate heterogeneity of urban life is forged into a unified realm. The



2.1 Aerial view of Central Park looking north, June 1938.
Source: McLaughlin Air Service. Courtesy of the New York City Parks Photo Archive.

city's exclusions and delights are thrown together in a tangled mass of human interaction. Here the tensions and contradictions of capitalist urbanization are softened under the shade of oaks, maples, and the remnants of the luxuriant vegetation that once covered Manhattan Island. The park now stands as a testament to the enduring place of nature in urban design. Lakes, meadows, and woods are traversed by a network of paths and bridges, combining formal elements with a variety of seminatural features. Looking beyond the park to the Manhattan skyline, one is powerfully aware that the whole landscape is one of human artifice, yet the presence of nature affords the semblance of continuity with the "first nature" of Manhattan Island.

This chapter explores the combination of political, economic, and cultural developments that contributed toward the creation of Central Park. We trace how the park has emerged as a focal point for a myriad of debates and controversies in the field of urban planning. The "greensward plan" devised in 1857 by Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) in collaboration with the English architect Calvert Vaux (1824–1895) has entered the pantheon of urban design as one of the most innovative contributions to urban planning ever conceived.[3] Yet despite the lasting significance of Olmsted's contribution, the precise meaning of his design legacy is laced with ambiguity: his ideas have been appropriated at different times toward the cause of Fourierist utopian socialism, various permutations of American nationalism, both the endorsement and the rejection of Jeffersonian agrarianism, and more recently as part of the emerging environmentalist critique of "industrial society."[4] Since the 1950s, Olmsted's work and ideas have enjoyed something of a renaissance, reflecting a decisive set of changes in American planning in response to the excesses of technological modernism and the suppression of nature within urban design.[5] A typical recent intervention in the Olmsted debate is by the landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn, who writes: "Much of Olmsted's work, written and built, is remarkably fresh a century after his retirement, but its potential has not been fully explored and realized. . . . Olmsted's legacy needs reclaiming."[6] But what is implied here by such a return to Olmsted? In what ways can nineteenth-century conceptions of urban design, however

innovative at the time, usefully contribute toward the planning dilemmas of the twenty-first century?

This chapter considers how an uncritical reading of Olmsted has served to perpetuate narrowly formalist conceptions of urban form in combination with a series of crudely behavioralist interpretations of the interaction between nature and urban society. But it is not only the design elements of Olmsted's legacy that present difficulties for interpretation: his associated political ideas and his conception of the relationship between public space and the development of a democratic public sphere also warrant closer examination. In order to make better sense of the meaning and significance of Central Park, we need to differentiate between the park as a material embodiment of human imagination and its role as a symbolic representation of abstract normative ideals connected to the ideological legitimation of American society. Recent debates on the meaning of public space from within the tradition of neo-Marxist urban theory have tended to invoke a Lefebvrian distinction between spaces created through their use and the use of space for the imposition of social order.[7] While this distinction serves as a valuable heuristic device for developing a critical frame of analysis, this chapter will seek to avoid an unnecessarily dualistic conception of public space by insisting on the centrality of the ideological dimensions to the simultaneous evolution of public space as both symbol and material embodiment of the contradictory character of capitalist urbanization and the social production of nature.

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the role of Olmsted both as the park's principal designer and also as a pioneer within the emerging fields of urban planning and landscape design in nineteenth-century America.[8] In many cases, however, critical writings on Central Park have systematically exaggerated Olmsted's role to provide a highly individualist and often hagiographical interpretation of his legacy. Irving Fisher, for example, writes of Olmsted's "creative genius" and locates his landscape ideals at the leading edge of a Hegelian unfolding of urban history:

> Combining the elements of beauty, function, and morality, intrinsic to the aesthetic theories of German romanticism and American Transcendentalism, the creation of parks and city planning emerged as part of the reform movement of the latter nineteenth century. And the city planner became the artistic genius who, by the infusion of his thought into nature, recreates nature at a higher level of organic unity.[9]

For the historian James Fitch, Olmsted was one of a number of "visionary engineers" who were able to realize their projects at a unique juncture of social transformation during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Olmsted, along with other leading designers and engineers such as Joseph Paxton, John Augustus Roebling, and Gustave Eiffel, are singled out as exceptional individuals who undertook tasks that "extended far beyond what would be today's ideas of professional responsibility."[10] In such commentaries we find nineteenth-century romanticism fused with the technical achievements of civil engineering and urban design to provide a remarkably individualized and aestheticized interpretation of urban form. Even Olmsted's codesigner Calvert Vaux caustically remarked in 1865 that the park would become merely "an ornament among many ornaments in the watch chain of Frederick Law Olmsted."[11] This chapter aims to unravel mythical conceptions of Olmsted's design legacy in order to emphasize the material circumstances behind the park's creation.

2.1 Cultural Anxiety, Land Speculation, and Public Space

The first serious attempt to conceive the future layout of Manhattan Island was set out in the well-known gridiron plan of 1811, in which undeveloped spaces beyond the edge of the city were portrayed as a checkerboard of individual land parcels awaiting investment. In reality, this plan was no more than a cartographic abstraction, since only the southern tip of Manhattan Island had yet been developed.[12] This original plan for the city envisioned only a slight expansion in open space, and even this scant provision was largely ignored in the following decades, with only fragments remaining as Union Square, Tompkins Square, and Madison Square Park. Furthermore, many of the city's smaller parks and squares remained

private spaces accessible only to nearby propertyholders. Before the creation of Central Park, the use of "public" space within the city was sharply divided: on the one hand, there was a patchwork of private squares and gardens jealously defended against the threat of public use; on the other hand, there were pleasure grounds or open spaces at the margins of the city, frequented by the city's working classes, in which music, games, and traditional festivals could be enjoyed.[13]

By the middle of the nineteenth century the urban landscape of Manhattan was one of increasing congestion, pollution, and social unrest, with serious riots in 1834, 1837, and 1849.[14] Deteriorating urban conditions set in train a complex series of debates among the city's political and cultural elites as to how the rapidly growing city could be improved. From the late 1840s onward we find increasing demands for a new public space in the city, articulated through newspaper editorials, political speeches, and articles in professional journals. Prominent early advocates for a large park in Manhattan include Walt Whitman, the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle,* and William Cullen Bryant, the editor of the *New York Evening Post.* In an editorial entitled "a new park" in July 1844, for example, Bryant demanded the creation of "the public garden of a great city."[15] In the following year Bryant wrote from England to lament: "The population of your city, increasing with such prodigious rapidity; your sultry summers, and the corrupt atmosphere generated in hot and crowded streets, make it a cause of regret that in laying out New York, no preparation was made, while it was yet practicable, for a range of parks and public gardens."[16]

An early supporter of Bryant was the influential writer and landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852). Writing in *The Horticulturalist,* Downing emphasized the role of nature as a civilizing influence on society and a path to knowledge and refinement.[17] He also saw parks as a means to foster the greater democratization of society through the establishment of "a larger and more fraternal spirit in our social life,"[18] a theme that was to prove pivotal to the success of Central Park as a symbol of both political and aesthetic advancement. For Downing, writing in 1851, the new park was to be emblematic of the known world, of all accumulated knowledge and learning, and a mark of the highest human achievement.[19] Hidden behind this kind of civic rhetoric was a

counterdiscourse of social elitism, forcible education of the masses, and a kind of cultural and technological rivalry with the cities of Europe. Indeed, as we shall see, the debate over public space was not a public one in the sense that there was any real engagement between the city's social and cultural elites and the aspirations and concerns of the city's burgeoning working-class population and newly arrived immigrant communities.

Early lobbyists for the creation of a new park were mostly wealthy merchants and landowners who had admired the public spaces of London, Paris, and other European cities. Typical of these was the merchant Robert Minturn and his wife Anna Mary Wendell, who brought together a committee to lobby for a new park in the early 1850s. The absence of adequate public space in New York was widely remarked upon as a mark of nineteenth-century America's cultural backwardness in comparison with Europe (a sentiment strengthened by the observations of overseas visitors such as Alexis de Tocqueville).[20] The European design legacy had also been fostered in North America through a number of naturalistic designs for urban cemeteries, beginning with Mount Auburn Cemetery near Boston in 1831, followed by Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia in 1836 and in particular by Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery in 1838. These cemeteries served to popularize landscaped gardens among urban elites, who developed a taste for the English picturesque tradition in landscape design as well as for the extensive deployment of statues and water features redolent of European gardens.[21] Cemeteries as pockets of tranquil nature within rapidly expanding North American cities were to play a significant role in influencing elite opinion at a crucial stage in the emergence of early urban planning ideals.

In the wake of the European romantic tradition, contact with nature was widely conceived as a means to foster a civil society capable of emulating the ostensibly stable and ordered societies of the Old World (a rather ironic sentiment given the political turmoil of nineteenth-century Europe). Arguments in favor of nature in cities were also imbued with a belief in the curative and circulatory powers of green spaces. Parks were widely portrayed as "urban lungs" capable of countering the effects of disease-carrying miasmas by facilitating greater ventilation and movement of air. In this sense the parks movement found a wider

resonance in the "hygienist" discourses of nineteenth-century public health reform. The *Irish American,* for example, insisted that the park be intended not for the rich "but as the 'lungs of the city' for the working classes."[22] The arguments for public space involved an interplay between premicrobiological theories of disease transmission and organic metaphors for the healthy functioning of cities. Olmsted himself was to claim in his memoirs that "air is disinfected by sunlight and foliage," adding a scientific veneer to the moral promotion of nature in cities.[23]

But the decisive argument in favor of parks, and the one consistently played down within the aesthetic concerns of the city's cultural elite, was the growing significance of real estate speculation in urban design. Owners of land and property in different locations across the city began to lobby to have the new park in their own vicinity. Earlier suggestions such as the planned extension to Jones Park on the Upper West Side provoked angry disagreements over how the proposed park should be financed. In order for a very large public space to be created, the potential benefits would have to be shown to accrue to the city as a whole rather than simply to local property owners, so that the costs might also be spread as widely as possible. In the event, a compromise was eventually reached over the financing of a new park by combining betterment assessments with new forms of general taxation.[24] The crucial significance of real estate speculation is borne out by the rapid impact of the park on the value of nearby land and property. Undeveloped lots at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 86th Street that were valued at little more than $500 in 1847 were worth in excess of $20,000 by 1868.[25] Descriptions of the park shortly after its completion reveal the extent of the economic advantages that had accrued to the city's property owners. In 1863, for example, Frederic B. Perkins reflected that "the Park now represents an expenditure of more than seven million dollars. . . . But against this debit of seven million dollars may be set a sum of *twenty-two and half millions* of dollars, being the increased value, since 1856, of the real estate in the three wards surrounding the Park, and of which a considerable part is due to the influence of the Park."[26] By 1868 New York had entered an inflationary speculative boom in vacant lots concentrated around the new park. With further improvements in building design,

rapid transit, and other aspects of urban infrastructure, the land market in Manhattan had been irrevocably altered. We should note that the speculative craze was not restricted to New York but extended to Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and other cities swept along by the land inflation of the post-Civil War years.[27] What we find in Manhattan is an intense interaction between local and national factors that contributed toward the escalation in land values.

The growing sophistication of real estate speculation in Manhattan could not have occurred without a series of legislative and administrative innovations in urban government. In May 1851 Mayor Ambrose C. Kingsland made the unprecedented demand that the city use its local tax base for the creation of a large public park that would serve as "a lasting monument to the wisdom, sagacity and forethought of its founders."[28] In 1853, the New York State Legislature authorized the City to use the power of eminent domain to acquire some seven hundred acres in the middle of Manhattan (a legal device that had already been employed for the construction of the city's water system); and in 1857, the State Legislature created the Central Park Commission, which was to control the park's construction and design. The Central Park Commission was the city's first planning agency and heralded an effective end to piecemeal, uncontrolled urban growth on Manhattan Island. Taken together, these various initiatives involved direct large-scale public intervention in the private land market on behalf of a new set of institutional arrangements to create "a space permanently removed from the private real estate market."[29] This is not to suggest, however, that these institutional arrangements worked against the interests of private capital. On the contrary: the park's creation altered the relationship between municipal government and private capital under the guise of a newly defined "public interest" within which the prospects for real estate speculation were greatly enhanced.

Opposition to the park was led principally by wealthy property owners who argued that the cost to taxpayers was too high, and that in any case the city lay within easy reach of surrounding countryside and open water. Other middle-class fears centered on crime and the opportunities for the congregation of undesirable social elements such as Irish and German "liquor dealers."[30] Even the progressives were uncertain: the New York Association for Improving the

Condition of the Poor feared that the park would force yet more overcrowding in the slum tenements of congested parts of the city.[31] The creation of a park commission appointed by New York State also provoked fierce political rivalries between Yankee Republican interests at state level who strongly backed the park and city-based Democratic supporters who were suspicious and resentful of what they perceived as outside interference in the management of city affairs. In May 1857, for example, some twenty thousand New Yorkers gathered in City Hall Park to denounce the Republican-dominated State Legislature's interference in local affairs and called for the proposed park to be abandoned.[32] The articulation of a putative general interest in the face of prevailing laissez-faire ideology was no easy matter: thousands of owners of property in or near the south side of the proposed park site demanded that its dimensions be reduced. Given the rapid physical expansion of the city and escalating land values spreading toward the undeveloped north of Manhattan Island, along with the projected cost of the project (at some three times the city's annual budget), the slightest delay might very easily have prevented the park from being built.[33]

A further uncertainty stemmed from cyclical fluctuations in the regional economy. In January 1854 the New York economy entered a sharp downturn that would lead into a depression and the financial panic of 1857. In March 1855 the deteriorating economic conditions led the city's Board of Aldermen to adopt the proposals of Mayor Jacob Westervelt to reduce the size of the park on the grounds of fiscal prudence. However, the election of Mayor Fernando Wood in 1855 reversed this; Wood argued that the creation of Central Park would be an "intelligent, philanthropic and patriotic public enterprise" and successfully cultivated support for the project among both wealthy merchants and also poor immigrant neighborhoods who would benefit from its use. In addition to shoring up his future political ambitions, Wood also stood to benefit personally from the project as a major West Side landowner: lots fronting the park that he had bought for a few hundred dollars were each worth ten thousand dollars by 1860.[34]

Three dominant themes emerge from these debates surrounding the creation of public space in mid-nineteenth-century New York. First, there is the emergence of a Yankee predilection for the English picturesque landscape transposed to an industrial urban setting, in the context of a pervasive cultural anxiety on the part of North American elites who consistently compared American cities with those of Europe. Second, at a political level the theme of the "public interest" was skillfully manipulated in order to impose a particular conception of urban order amid rapid and seemingly chaotic patterns of urban change. And third, the growing sophistication of real estate speculation becomes linked with newly emerging conceptions of the aesthetics of nature and urban design. This last theme is of particular interest in that it facilitated an uncanny degree of congruence between a distinctively American nature aesthetic derived from the legacy of romantic idealism and the emergence of a sophisticated metropolitan ideology of nature within which the commodification of nature as a social product became an integral dimension to the dynamics of capitalist urbanization.

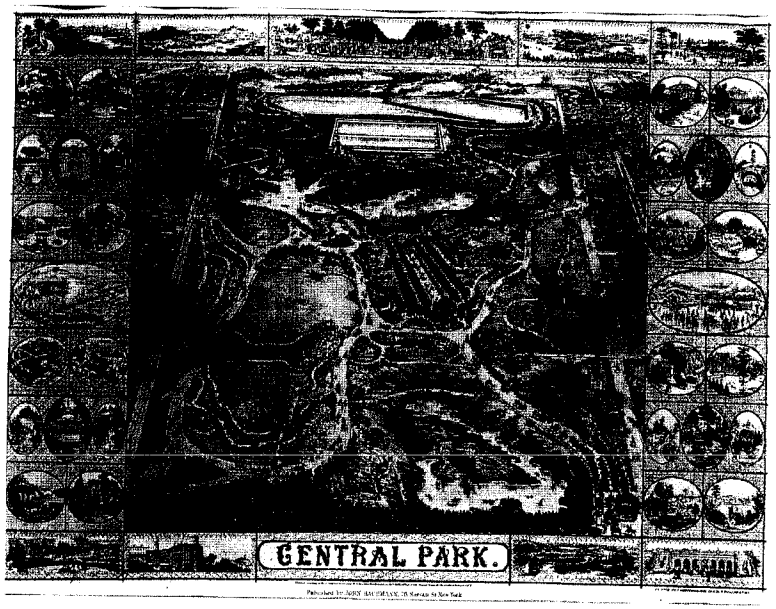
2.2 Creating the Garden of a Great City

In 1857 the newly reelected Central Park Commission held a national contest for the design of the park, and the "greensward plan" devised by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux was chosen from some 33 competing entries.[35] The greensward plan combined three main elements: a pastoral landscape with open rolling meadows, exemplified by the so-called Sheep Meadow; a more naturalistic "picturesque" design, most obviously represented in the semiwild landscape to be found in the Ramble; and a variety of formal elements contained in the fountains, lakes, and boulevards of the Mall, the Promenade, and Bethesda Terrace. A further unique feature was that all four roads traversing the park were to be constructed at a lower level than the park's surface in order to emphasize the sense of an uninterrupted green space in the center of the city. In terms of design precedents, the greensward plan drew primarily on a naturalistic design and notably eschewed contemporary alternatives such as the crudely utilitarian geometries of "republican simplicity" epitomized by the gridiron street plan; the largely unplanned popular eclecticism to be found nearby in the pleasure gardens of Hoboken's Elysian Fields; and in particular the imperial and neoclassical tropes of artificial civic display best known to Olmsted and Vaux through the

reconstruction of Second Empire Paris under Napoleon III.[36] Above all, the park was to be unequivocally separate from the rest of the city not just aesthetically but also in its culture of use, to create a new kind of public space for a more refined conception of American urban life (figure 2.2).

The construction of Central Park involved some twenty thousand workers for the removal of three million cubic yards of soil, the planting of over 270,000 trees and shrubs, and the building of a new reservoir for the city's recently completed water supply system.[37] Much of the land purchased for the park consisted of swampy and rocky plots undesirable for private development. Northern parts of the site were already a city landmark on account of their oak, chestnut, and elm forests: a fragmentary reminder of Manhattan Island's former beauty that was to be incorporated into the park's design.[38] Toward the southern end of the site, however, lived some of the most marginalized communities in the city (figure 2.3). The erasure of these communities may even have been a significant motivating factor behind the political momentum for the park's creation (and the fear that informal settlements would proliferate). Consider, for example, the description of the original site offered by Perkins in his popular guide to the new park:

> In various portions of its savage territory, tribes of squalid city barbarians had encamped, and, in dirty shanties or in the open air, drove the fetid business of bone-boiling—"dreadful trade;" nourished herds of measly swine upon the sickish feculence of distilleries, or murdered rapid successions of wretched "stump-tail" cows, who dissolved bodily into mere rottenness on the same nauseous food, as they stood in the stalls, poisoning the city infants with their infectious milk as they died. Cinder-shifters, rag-pickers, and swill-men constituted its more cleanly or aristocratic classes, unless now and then some thief or bolder criminal glorified its huts or holes with a more famous presence. It was a miserable realm of barrenness, stench, filth, poverty, lawlessness, and crime.[39]



2.2 Central Park, looking north from 59th Street, lithograph by C. Bachman (circa 1865). Note the empty lots depicted at the edges of the park.
Source: J. Clarence Davies Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

2.3 Squatters' shacks in the vicinity of the Central Park site (1862).
Source: Collection of the New-York Historical Society. Victor Prevost/George Eastman House, Rochester.

Surviving historical sources suggest that the construction of the park displaced some sixteen hundred residents of shantytowns in the designated area, including Irish pig farmers, German gardeners, and what may have been the city's most significant antebellum black settlement called Seneca Village, which included three churches and a school.[40] The destruction of Seneca Village illuminates the degree to which the "public interest" involved not only the erasure of existing communities but also the promotion of a particular conception of a unified urban society and an intense marginalization of those groups that fell outside this conception.

The disparate influences on the greensward plan illuminate the interconnections between the park's design and a broader ideological agenda emerging at a unique juncture in American history. Olmsted and Vaux explicitly rejected the suggestions of Richard Morris Hunt for ornamental gates and other imperial symbols reminiscent of Haussmann's Paris.[41] In this sense they sought to construct a distinctively republican aesthetic capable of meeting the aspirations of a far wider public than had hitherto been served by American landscape design. They also eschewed Andrew Jackson Downing's design for the park with its emphasis on "forcible education" through labeled trees and shrubs.[42] In rejecting Downing's approach they distanced themselves from the most paternalistic and narrowly didactic dimensions to nineteenth-century social reform. Yet Downing's promotion of English landscape gardeners such as Humphry Repton, John Nash, and Joseph Paxton was to prove influential, not least through Vaux's earlier professional association with Downing (and the fact that Downing had been one of the leading American exponents of romantic landscape design before his death in 1852).[43] We know from Olmsted's writings that the design legacy of Uvedale Price, William Gilpin, and Humphry Repton proved highly significant. Olmsted had also enthused over "picturesque" park designs he had observed in England during his visit to Europe in 1850, such as Stowe, Stourhead, and Blenheim.[44] The intellectual and aesthetic lineage between Repton and Olmsted is especially intriguing because Repton expanded existing conceptions of landscape improvement to encompass changes in social relations, to the chagrin of his contemporary antagonists such as Price and Richard Payne Knight. The modern civic vision of

Repton finds resonance in Olmsted's search for a more democratic republican landscape in the face of tensions between elite and popular tastes, uneasy relations among different bodies of knowledge and professional expertise, and conflicting conceptions of national identity and landscape iconography.[45]

The aesthetic theories of Price and Gilpin also provided an alternative model to the more formal approaches exemplified by Adolphe Alphand's "manicured" designs for the Buttes-Chaumont, constructed during the same period as part of the imperial facade of Second Empire Paris.[46] The artist and critic Robert Smithson has argued that this intellectual lineage to Price and Gilpin forms part of a radically different conception of nature to that derived from the German romantic tradition:

> As a result we are not hurled into the spiritualism of Thoreauian transcendentalism, or its present day offspring of "modernist formalism" rooted in Kant, Hegel, and Fichte. Price, Gilpin, and Olmsted are forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape. Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects. Nature for the dialectician is *indifferent* to any formal ideal.[47]

While Smithson is right to emphasize the ambiguity of any direct connection between Olmsted's aesthetic and the legacy of European romanticism, we should not overlook the blurring of aesthetic and political judgment that links Olmsted's conception of the civic realm to the Enlightenment preoccupation with the refinement of taste (and the concomitant distrust of popular culture).[48] We can also find a degree of continuity between Olmsted and the pantheistic romantic vision of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. The creation of Central Park can be perceived as part of the emergence of a distinctively American tradition of neoromantic nature aesthetics in the context of the irreversible transformation of American landscape and society.[49] For Leo Marx, it is Emerson and Whitman who provide the most vibrant celebration of

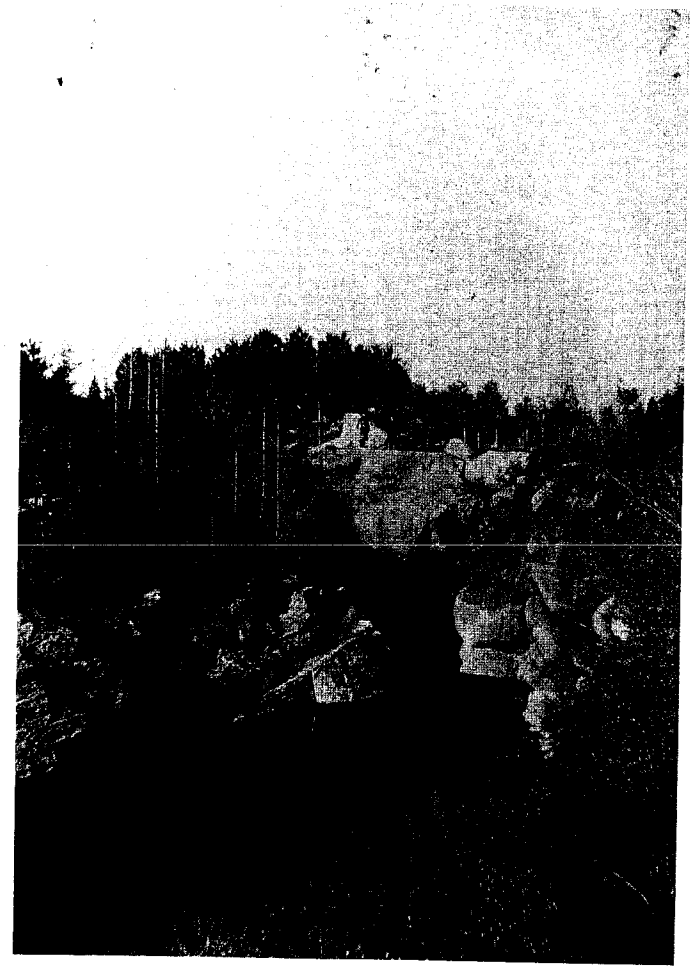
"this industrialized version of the pastoral ideal," as a republican fusion of nature and culture in the new urban America.[50] Central Park provides a dramatic illustration of what Marx calls the "middle landscape," which is necessarily dialectical in relation to the Jeffersonian rural idyll and its evolving relation to nineteenth-century urbanization.[51]

What was distinctive about the emerging dialectical approach to landscape design in nineteenth-century America was the articulation of a new kind of mediation between nature and culture that self-consciously evoked a metropolitan nature aesthetic. The creation of Central Park marked a growing aesthetic distinction between landscapes for production and for consumption: beyond the park lay the increasingly rationalized agricultural landscapes and more distant plantations and trade networks that sustained the transformation of urban space; within the park, an imaginary natural order existed as a new form of cultural consumption emanating from emerging patterns of touristic engagement between the urban middle classes and the perceived wilderness of "first nature." Evidently, some visitors were perplexed at how much the park resembled their preconceived conception of a wild landscape rather than a meticulously designed urban park:

> Even the Park itself has been somewhat of a disappointment, according to the preconceived ideas of the visitors. There are those who look for great, sculptured gateways, and a scene of fountains and statues, and to whom the passage through the openings in the low wall will seem but a going out into the country. The remark of Horace Greeley on his first visit—"They have let it alone more than I thought they would"—comes to these in a different sense; and it is only by remembering the wilderness of rocks and shanties, stagnant pools, and bare, rubbish-strewed soil, on Fifth, Seventh, and Eighth Avenues, in these high latitudes, three years ago, that one can realize the wonders that have been worked in making this *seeming* Nature what it is.[52]

This phrase "*seeming* Nature" is crucial to any understanding of the cultural and ideological significance of the park as an imaginary representation of nature for a sophisticated urban audience. The semiwild features of Central Park are most strikingly represented in the Ramble (figure 2.4), which resembled the kind of scene that was being popularized by the growth of tourism to mountainous areas during the early nineteenth century. The creation of the Ramble reflects the emergence of a distinctively American approach to landscape aesthetics associated with Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School.[53] These artists played a key role in popularizing "wild nature" in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and their work would certainly have been familiar to many New Yorkers who craved something of the "cool country" in the midst of the summer heat.

In Cole's *The Oxbow* (1836), however, we can detect a tension between two contrasting types of landscape iconography: an imaginary wilderness of "first nature" and a very different kind of nature aesthetic derived from the classical trope of cultivated gardens and riparian civilization (figure 2.5). In Central Park a similar contrast divides the imagery of the Ramble from that of the Sheep Meadow, drawing on different kinds of cultural engagement with nature. The "urban pastoral" element of the Sheep Meadow can be interpreted as an allegorical form masking the demise of the rural Jeffersonian ideal.[54] At the very moment when ostensibly stable agricultural societies were being irrevocably transformed, an aesthetic veneer of rural imagery was being busily recreated in urban space. In this case, the landscape has become a kind of fetishized commodity, the high point of an "agrarian bourgeois art" described by Raymond Williams as "a rural landscape emptied of rural labour and of labourers; a sylvan and watery prospect, with a hundred analogies in neopastoral painting and poetry, from which the facts of production had been banished."[55] Just as the sunken roads are artfully hidden from view, so the real relationship between the park and the city is difficult to discern. The role of the human hand is rendered uncertain, leaving the park with no apparent origins. The park workers remain largely invisible, holding the landscape in a suspended animation of ecological succession for the aesthetic adornment of the city.



2.4 Central Park's Ramble in Fred. B. Perkins, *The Central Park* (1863). View north toward cave showing plantings of pine and larch trees.
Source: Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

2.5 Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)* (1836).
Source: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The design of Central Park tells us much about changing perceptions of nature in nineteenth-century American thought. Its imaginative combination of so many seemingly irreconcilable elements makes it a kind of medley of different aesthetic responses to capitalist urbanization. But our consideration of park design leads us to wider questions concerning the relationship between public space, civil society, and the emergence of new forms of urbanism. How, for example, did the park design relate to a broader concept of urban society and the possibilities for cultural and political advancement? And how did the urban vision engendered by the creation of Central Park actually connect with the changing political, social, and economic complexion of the rapidly growing city?

2.3 Olmsted's Urban Vision: A Fragile Synthesis

To understand the paradoxical dimension to the design for Central Park, we need to examine Olmsted's conception of the "ideal city" as a distinctive alternative to both the violent anarchy of the Western frontier and the repressive backwardness of the rural South.[56] For Olmsted, writing in 1858, the park was "a democratic development of the highest significance and on the success of which, in my opinion, much of the progress of art and esthetic culture in this country is dependent."[57] This is a revealing and important claim because it shows how Olmsted's landscape vision combined political and aesthetic concerns in an urban context. But how did politics and aesthetics interact in antebellum New York? And how might the creation of a new public space actually contribute toward the advancement of democratic ideals and more refined conceptions of urban life?

Olmsted's concerns with urban design must be placed within the context of a series of decisive changes in nineteenth-century American society. The historian Albert Fein suggests that the decline of slavery and the concomitant emergence of new democratic and ethical ideals suffused Olmsted's sense of political responsibility to build a better kind of society. In his vivid description of the antebellum South—*The Cotton Kingdom*—Olmsted argued against slavery and the plantation system on the grounds of justice and natural law.[58] Yet Olmsted's conception of social change was cautious and incremental, combining ethical and

economic arguments in a kind of pragmatic synthesis.[59] Olmsted was especially concerned with the effects of slavery on the economic efficiency of American agriculture and, far from condemning southern elites, wrote of his admiration for "true and brave Southern gentlemen."[60] We can argue that Olmsted was no radical or abolitionist, but a paternalist whose writings on the South illuminate the complex political and economic tensions that would explode in the Civil War.[61] The particular significance of his antipathy toward the rural South lay in his identification of cultural advancement with the growth of cities freed from the strictures of an agrarian economy. Olmsted's conception of modern society was founded on a harmonious interplay between nature and culture within which cities, with their civic institutions, cultural vibrancy, and ideas, formed the "natural fruits of democracy."[62] Central to his vision was a belief that if only the physical hardships of nineteenth-century urbanism could be overcome, the real potential of urban life might be realized. The city was not an aberrant social form to be feared but a dynamic focus for the creative energies of modern society.

The combination of republican ideals with urban design can be traced to Olmsted's visit to England's Birkenhead Park in 1850. Enthused by what he described as "this people's garden," Olmsted was determined to produce a distinctively republican landscape in an American context.[63] Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park, which opened in 1847, was the first state-directed park to be constructed in England, as distinct from the royal parks of the past. This political distinction is borne out by contemporary responses to Birkenhead Park as "a great democratic pleasureground; a proof of the ease and the natural method by which a democracy can create, for its own enjoyment, gardens as elaborate, costly, and magnificent, as those of monarchs."[64] Given Olmsted's concern with republican inclusiveness in urban design, it is somewhat ironic that it was the growing tension between aesthetic elitism and popular culture that would ultimately undermine his direct involvement with Central Park and lead to the marginalization of the political and cultural values he espoused.

The articulation of a nature aesthetic for a wide public audience marks a significant break from the European intellectual heritage that found its apotheosis in the work of Andrew Jackson Downing. American cultural elites of the ante-

bellum era were disdainful toward what they characterized as southern European "indifference" to the refined aesthetics of nature embodied in the northern European romantic tradition. By associating nature appreciation with northern European culture, Downing and others had adopted an explicitly racialized aesthetic in which the appreciation of the beauty of nature was considered to be an Anglo-Saxon domain. For Susannah Zetzel, however, this contrasts with Olmsted's recognition of the social heterogeneity of urban America and the futility of pursuing an elitist aesthetic: "Where Downing thought that only the Anglo-Saxon races could be ennobled by contact with nature, and that for others more explicit direction would be necessary, Olmsted's vision was universal."[65]

Olmsted shared with many other American intellectuals a concern with the need to create a unifying national culture in the midst of sweeping social and economic change. Mass immigration was creating a complex urban society in which any semblance of Anglo-Saxon cultural homogeneity was fast disappearing: by 1855 some 52 percent of New York's population was foreign born. Early responses to the park repeatedly emphasized the rhetorical theme of the whole spectrum of urban society brought together, even if the reality was very different. In 1861, for example, Charles Eliot Norton claimed that Olmsted stood "first in the production of great works which answer the need and give expression to the life of our immense and miscellaneous democracy."[66] But what kind of public space was envisaged by the construction of Central Park? Can we really conceive of Olmsted's vision as universal?

The park was certainly never intended as a forum for political debate and the promotion of discursive interaction between strangers. It was rather an enlargement of the private sphere through the extension of nineteenth-century conceptions of bourgeois domesticity into a public arena. If we examine the way the park was managed, we find that the use of this newly created public space was initially highly restrictive, with rules to discourage picnics and other group activities.[67] Despite these restrictions, public use of the park grew rapidly: when the park finally opened in the winter of 1859, thousands skated on lakes built over the former swamps (figure 2.6). By 1863 the park was receiving more than four million visitors a year, rising to over seven million visitors in 1865 and

2.6 *Central-Park, Winter. The Skating Pond*, lithograph by Currier and Ives (1862). Source: Print Collection. Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs. Courtesy of the New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

nearly 11 million by 1871.[68] In its early years, however, the park was effectively an elite playground, with access largely dependent on the use of carriages (which only a small fraction of the population could afford). Much was made of the social display of early park users and especially the fashions sported by women park visitors at a time of newly emerging urban spaces for leisure, consumption, and ostentatious displays of wealth.[69] In subsequent decades the development of public transport improved accessibility for poorer and more distant parts of the city (the impressive IRT subway only began running in 1904) and the restrictions on park use were gradually relaxed, leading to peak usage in the early decades of the twentieth century before rising levels of car ownership led to new patterns of urban leisure.

The relationship between park design and the recreational needs of a wider public than that envisaged in Olmsted's original plan was to prove a pivotal element in political disagreements surrounding the control of Central Park. Olmsted's refusal to include sports facilities in the park design left him vulnerable to allegations of disdain for the popular culture of industrial America. In 1859, for example, he insisted that "no sport can be permitted which would be inconsistent with the general method of amusement."[70] The populist city-based political machines were quick to emphasize any elitist connotations in Olmsted's design. The "genteel reformers," with whom Olmsted had some association, were opposed to political and economic change and sought to maintain the dominance of an educated elite.[71] The cultural elitism of Olmsted and his followers left them politically vulnerable to newly emerging populist machine politics, particularly the Irish Democratic power vested in Tammany Hall from the late 1860s onward, which naturally viewed English cultural traditions with suspicion if not disdain. Tammany press outlets such as the *New York Evening Express* ridiculed Olmsted's backers as "the Miss Nancies of Central Park art" who "babble in the papers and in Society Circles, about aesthetics and architecture, vistas and landscapes, the quiver of a leaf and the proper blendings of light and shade."[72] The Yankee elites that had fostered the park's development in the 1850s found their conception of the "public interest" rapidly marginalized, leading to Olmsted's dismissal in 1878 from any managerial role in the park. From the 1870s onward a new phase of

capitalist urbanization fostered a different set of political and economic relations.[73] The emerging political polarization between increasingly militant labor organizations and the power of capital tended to sideline the aesthetic and didactic concerns of Olmsted and his followers. Over time, the fragility of his conception of democratic society became exposed to critical scrutiny, yet his influence on landscape design continued to grow: a paradox that permeates contemporary responses to his work and ideas and invites a closer consideration of the enduring power of nature within urban design.

2.4 Olmsted Rediscovered: An Emerging Preservationist Ethic

For Olmsted, urban planning was an art in which aesthetic concerns took precedence over any more radical criticisms of the workings of the urban land market or of society more generally. The greensward plan for Central Park was an aesthetic vision imposed on society as an explicit alternative to what he perceived as the "crude and materialistic impulses of popular culture."[74] Though he conceived of public space as the physical embodiment of a democratic society, the design and management of these spaces was to be left to a technical elite, suggesting a profound ambivalence toward more concrete forms of democratic participation. Olmsted's approach epitomized an emerging characteristic of urban planning, as "cosmopolitan élites, deprived of grass-roots political power, learned to assert their authority in public life through specific expertise in the higher echelons of urban governance."[75] As the historian Thomas Bender notes of Olmsted and his allies, they "were concerned to establish their opinion in public; they were not interested in a public or political sphere that served as an arena for competing ideas and interests."[76] The overwhelming priority of nineteenth-century philanthropists was one of order: a social and spatial order within which the interrelated problems of "pauperism, congestion, environmental chaos, and aesthetic disarray" could be handled by a combination of professional expertise and advances in scientific knowledge.[77] The promotion of urban parks can be conceived as simply one element of "the larger social-improvement crusade" that developed in

nineteenth-century America.[78] In this sense, the nineteenth-century urban park forms an integral element in the emergence of a distinctive political vision rooted in a redefinition of relations between nature and culture.

For the artist and critic Robert Smithson, Olmsted threw "a whole new light on the nature of American art" with his distinctively dialectical view of nature and society.[79] But can we really conceive of Olmsted's vision as "dialectical" in a Marxian or Lefebvrian sense? Or is the design for Central Park best interpreted as an ambiguous and transitional moment between urban beautification and the emerging dynamics of technocratic planning that would develop rapidly from the late nineteenth century onward? Olmsted's conception of public space developed out of a dual emphasis on the maintenance of social order and the enrichment of civil society. In this sense, one could argue that Central Park embodied the Lefebvrian tension between spaces appropriated through their use and spaces devised in order to impose order. It is difficult, however, to apply the Lefebvrian conceptual schema directly to Central Park without qualification. The park has passed through a series of contrasting phases in its use and meaning. In the era preceding the park's construction, much of the chosen site had already become a public space through extensive cultivation, grazing, informal settlement, and a variety of marginal economic activities. When the park opened it became an ongoing focus for markedly different conceptions of civic culture, recreation, and social interaction, which effectively superseded the original rationale for the park's creation.

More recently, a period of relative openness in the park's political and public role has given way to a revanchist reiteration of the original vision under the guise of an increasingly privatized approach to park management and control. From the late 1960s onward, for example, we find a rediscovery of Olmsted marked by a shifting emphasis in park management initiated under Mayor John V. Lindsay toward the preservation and enhancement of Olmsted's original designs. Since the 1980s, an Olmstedian conception of order and harmony has been repeatedly invoked in order to provide an "aesthetic" solution to the contradictions of capitalist urbanization in the post-Fordist era. This renewed commitment

to the aesthetics of park management has coincided with the growing manifestation of poverty, destitution, and homelessness in New York's most important public space.

Whereas the nineteenth-century political rationale for state intervention in urban design rested principally on the twin concerns of public health and social order (however ill defined), in the late twentieth century the focus moved inexorably toward crime and combating the consequences of social exclusion. What is striking is the degree of ideological continuity between the original pretext for the park's creation and the contemporary emphasis on the more regularized and stylized dimensions to Olmsted's urban vision. Successive park management plans have focused on the restoration and recreation of original features in the Olmsted design as part of a new commitment to the preservation of urban architectural heritage.[80]

The Central Park Conservancy, set up as a private charity in 1980, now provides half of the park's operating budget, provides half the funds for capital projects, and employs around eighty percent of the park's staff.[81] This organization has raised more private donations for a public park than any other in American history, transforming Central Park over twenty years from a "graffiti-smeared ruin that was an international embarrassment" into a "meticulously restored greensward." To do this, the Central Park Conservancy has tapped into complex social networks of wealthy patronage and charitable giving in the affluent wards bordering the park and has enlisted the expertise of leading financiers such as the billionaire leveraged-buyout tycoon Henry R. Kravis.[82] The restoration of the greensward vision has reinforced the vast disparities in wealth and land values associated with the completion of the park in the nineteenth century. Since the park budget cuts of the 1970s, there has been growing inequality in access to and quality of public space across the city. By the early 1990s New York ranked nineteenth among major American cities in terms of per capita public expenditure on its park system (far below Los Angeles or Chicago, for example) and was left with just half the park staff it had in 1960.[83] Recent fund-raising successes for Central Park may be contrasted with neglected municipal parks elsewhere in the city. Some illustration of the uneven capacity to raise private money for public space is

provided by two fund-raising dinners held in 1999: a dinner held for Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem raised $7,000 whereas a Central Park event raised $805,000.[84] Even the possibility of spreading the wealth of Central Park to other Olmsted-designed parks such as the shabby Morningside Park in Harlem has been resisted by donors: it seems that the commitment to restoring Olmsted's pastoral vision is highly localized, not a citywide objective. The park has become a cultural institution in its own right comparable with the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, and other symbols of social and political prestige in the city.

The 1990s saw a sharp polarization of perspectives on public space, with community gardens and other alternative "green pockets" under intense pressure from developers despite well-organized opposition from grassroots organizations such as the Green Guerrillas and the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition.[85] The scale of gentrification pressures on urban space has intensified since the 1980s, producing new inequalities driven by international as well as national flows of capital and investment. The temporary lull in the wake of the 1987 stock market crash and the recession of the early 1990s has been superseded by a new wave of development pressures far greater than in the past.[86] Central Park is now the tranquil core of an increasingly globalized dynamic of land commodification in Manhattan. It is striking that the pressures that have contributed toward Central Park's cultural and financial renaissance have simultaneously undermined the prospects for the city's hundreds of community gardens concentrated in poorer neighborhoods (figure 2.7). This example should discourage any simplistic connection between public space and the promotion of urban nature as a dimension to ecologically framed conceptions of urban design.

As we have seen, Olmsted's vision was never a public one from its inception but that of an urban elite who successfully imposed it on the wider society. The fact that Central Park has subsequently acquired a historical and cultural legacy of public action and collective memory is incidental to its original rationale within the commodification of both land and nature in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the park has been used to illustrate an abstract, normative ideal of an inclusive public sphere that is held to have existed in the past.[87] In *City of Quartz,* for example, Mike Davis invokes Olmsted's Central Park

2.7 The Magnolia Tree Earth Garden, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, 1996.
Source: Photograph by Matthew Gandy.

as America's answer to the class polarization of nineteenth-century Europe and a symbol of a more progressive social order.[88] Davis suggests that the Olmsted legacy provides an alternative to the militarization of urban space in contemporary America. Yet the fact that Olmsted's original ideas have been drawn on in recent years to shore up a preservationist and in many respects exclusionary conception of public space reveals the precariousness of any argument that relies on nineteenth-century conceptions of urban form as a means to challenge the contemporary gentrification of public space. Recent debates on the future of public space have rightly questioned a nostalgic attachment to the illusory public spaces of the past.

In the case of Central Park, its zenith in terms of social inclusiveness was probably reached in the Lindsay era of the 1960s and early 1970s with new festivals, happenings, and large-scale political gatherings (figure 2.8).[89] Yet the new openness to different uses of public space by Mayor Lindsay and his Parks Commissioner August Heckscher provoked fierce criticism from wealthy residents bordering the park and from conservative politicians who objected to "flag burning rights in Central Park."[90] This period also coincided with the emergence of a combination of fiscal and managerial problems in park maintenance that gradually assumed increasing significance in the politics of public space. The contemporary emphasis on "reclaiming" the park and making the space more attractive to middle-class New Yorkers is as much a reflection of socioeconomic shifts within the city as of any rediscovery of Olmstedian ideals in urban planning. The fact that Olmsted's aesthetic ideals find a strong resonance with an emerging preservationist ethic reveals the ease with which ostensibly progressive social ideals have been transmuted into new forms of cultural boosterism to serve the needs of powerful urban elites. Recent changes in park management and funding may have improved the park's appearance, but the "sovereign public" has seen an erosion of control over the city's most important public space.[91] To rely on Olmsted's legacy to chart a coherent critical response to the precarious status of contemporary public space not only risks a simplification of the relationship between public space, the public sphere, and development of civil society, but also

2.8 Anti-war "Love-Lee," Sheep Meadow, Central Park, circa 1968.
Source: Museum of the City of New York.

perpetuates an anachronistic nineteenth-century frame of reference for understanding the place of nature in urban design.

To return to the influential neo-Marxian interventions by Henri Lefebvre, which have proved a recurring element in recent debates over public space, we should note that Lefebvre has a weakly developed theorization of the social production of nature, which has been a crucial ideological and aesthetic dimension to Central Park's success.[92] The reworking of relations between nature and culture is pivotal to the sophistication of Central Park not only as an aesthetic advance on earlier developments in American landscape design but also as a measure of the park's skillful integration into the dynamics of real estate speculation and the commodification of the "first nature" of Manhattan Island. In this sense the park represents a kind of elaborate spatial fix to the economic downturn of the 1850s and was a precursor to changing patterns of investment that gathered pace from the 1880s onward in a new phase of global capital accumulation within which New York was to play a growing role. The speculative dimension to the creation of Central Park introduces the pivotal contribution of abstract space to the commodification of nature, in which capital becomes aestheticized as an imaginary fragment of "first nature" replete with lakes, meadows, and vine-covered rocks. Yet in Central Park we fail to find a clear Lefebvrian transition between absolute, historical and abstract space but rather an alternative periodization superimposed in its place: the pretext for the park's creation was born out of the abstract commodification of nature, yet the subsequent use of the park has created a kind of imaginary "absolute space" in the center of Manhattan Island rooted in a primal mythology of urban origins.

2.5 EMERALD DREAMS

Central Park has been a recurring focus of interest for contemporary landscape architects, planners, and artists who seek to explore a more productive relation between nature and culture than that provided by the twentieth-century legacy of technological modernism. The park has become a powerful symbol for a kind of harmonic mediation between society and nature that allows the semblance of

organic continuity to an imaginary American *Gemeinschaft* embodied in the Jeffersonian ideal. In contrast to this widely held position, this chapter has argued that the park is best conceived as a landscape that exemplifies some of the most powerful aesthetic and ideological dimensions to the dynamics of nineteenth-century capitalist urbanization. It is a landscape that demonstrates a highly sophisticated approach to the commodification of nature, not its antithesis as has so often been erroneously suggested. The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, for example, in an otherwise perceptive essay, suggests that "Central Park is not only the major recreational facility of Manhattan but also the record of its progress: a taxidermic preservation of nature that exhibits forever the drama of culture outdistancing nature."[93] In reality of course Central Park is not a preservation of nature but an example of "*seeming* Nature" (to borrow Henry Cleaveland's phrase) produced in accordance with the particular aesthetic predilections of mid-nineteenth-century cultural elites. Although the greensward plan for Central Park appears radically different from the geometrical abstraction of the earlier gridiron plan for the city, both landscapes reflected the outlook of the city's political and cultural elites: the decisive difference between the two lies in the aesthetic and ideological mediation of the relationship between nature and culture. While the initial city grid rested on a Promethean obliteration of the "first nature" of Manhattan Island, the Arcadian vision of Central Park exulted in an imaginary nature that in no way contradicted the fundamental dynamics of nineteenth-century urbanization. Perhaps it would be more useful to reframe our understanding of this relationship in terms of the social production of nature under modernity, with Central Park representing a resolution to this tension in the specific context of nineteenth-century American urbanization. The incorporation of a water reservoir into the fabric of the park's design reveals a far-reaching utilitarian and aesthetic synergy between the new park and the reshaping of relations between urban society and metropolitan nature. Both the creation of Central Park and the earlier construction of the Croton Aqueduct represent a significant realignment in the relationship between nature, capital, and urban space. They represent, above all, the reworking of the raw materials of nature into a new synthesis with modern society, in order to harvest the aesthetic and biophysical properties of the natural world to human advantage.

The achievements of nineteenth-century urban planning, both real and imagined, continue to cast a powerful hold over contemporary thinking on cities and urban design. Nature-based designs have been a defining element in virtually all conceptions of the urban ideal from the garden cities of Ebenezer Howard and Patrick Geddes to *La ville radieuse* of Le Corbusier and *The Disappearing City* of Frank Lloyd Wright. Just as nineteenth-century urban planners and social reformers repeatedly drew on nature as a means to create a more manageable and humane kind of urban society, we find similar sentiments today emerging from the ashes of the discredited modernist attempts to control urban space. The architect Peter Calthorpe, for example, suggests that "nature should provide the order and underlying structure of the metropolis."[94] In a similar vein, the architectural critic Charles Jencks concludes his analysis of the Los Angeles riots by invoking an urban bioregionalism drawing heavily on ecological analogies of diversity and interdependence.[95] Yet such perspectives invariably treat the city as a discrete sociospatial unit unrelated to any broader social and economic processes. These ecological conceptions of urban form believe that "nature," however ill-defined, provides a blueprint capable of contributing meaningfully to the advancement of city planning and social policy.

Olmsted's conception of the role of nature within urban design was born out of a preservationist instinct to protect (or recreate) natural fragments within an unchallenged urban whole. His role in the creation of the first wilderness park in the Yosemite Valley during the 1860s and his opposition to the destruction of the Niagara Falls by water power generators in the 1880s exemplify his approach. The protection of fragments of wild nature not only marks a distinctively American contribution to the emergence of environmental ethics but also provides a link between the Ramble of Central Park and the wider development of an American philosophy of nature that combined urban aesthetic sensibilities with an increasingly sophisticated scenic panorama. During the twentieth century Olmsted's ideas were developed further by Lewis Mumford, Philip Lewis, Ian

McHarg, and a generation of radical urban scholars, landscape designers, and architects, but the underlying faith in professional and technical elites was ultimately to undermine the wider legitimacy of environmental planning from the 1960s onward (a theme we will explore in subsequent chapters).

Central Park was the first large-scale meticulously planned urban park in America. Its significance contributed to the emergence of both urban planning and landscape architecture in America as powerful and respected professions with legitimate roles in urban government. Olmsted himself was to play a key role in designing the parks of Buffalo, Chicago, Montreal, Detroit, Boston, Rochester, Louisville, and many other cities across North America. The park-building program extended into the Progressive era as reformers sought to promote the health and morality of working-class citizens. In subsequent decades, the United States Parks Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and a variety of other federal interventions in environmental management emerged from the expanded role of the state which grew out of nineteenth-century concerns with public health, social order, and advancement of the public good. Yet all these developments have stood in a precarious relation to the exigencies of capital accumulation, real estate speculation, and the counterdiscourses of laissez-faire public policy making. A central paradox running through Olmsted's contribution to the emergence of urban planning derives from conflicting conceptions of order in urban space: on the one hand, a series of conceptions of a natural order embracing an urban pastoral vision of social stability and aesthetic harmony; on the other, a conception of urban space as a rational grid or network amenable to management and control. It is ironic, therefore, that in the late 1860s Olmsted and Vaux designed the first multilane landscaped highway (Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn) and the first garden suburb in North America (Riverside, Illinois). These new developments would in time foster a countervision of "autopia," to use Reyner Banham's term, which would become the focus of a ferocious critique developed by Olmsted's successors in the organic wing of twentieth-century urban planning.[96] The critical point is that Olmsted and his future champions never understood the dynamics of capitalist urbanization. Whereas Central Park had been created in response to the physical and social chaos of rapid urbanization in nineteenth-

century America, the development of new transport technologies enabled urban elites to escape the confines of maladministered urban space, leading toward an urban landscape of ever greater separation (see chapter 3). The full implications of this disjuncture were not to become apparent until the rapid social and spatial polarization of the 1960s, but its roots stem from the inherited political and design legacy of nineteenth-century urbanism.

Central Park has succeeded as a public space in spite of the ambiguities behind its creation. From the outset, the "public" arguments for a park emphasized a search for order, a harmonious balance between nature and culture rooted in organic analogies of a healthy city as a means to facilitate greater economic prosperity and ensure social harmony. In reality, however, it was sophisticated and farsighted economic calculations on the part of powerful merchants, land speculators, and property owners that carried the day. Olmsted's aesthetic vision proved acceptable to the city's political and economic elite because it powerfully inflated land values at a crucial juncture in the city's metamorphosis into a world city. The fact that Central Park has been admired and appreciated by generations of New Yorkers is an ironic outcome of the combination of an Anglophile aesthetic vision with sophisticated real estate speculation. The transformation of Central Park into a popular and enduring public space disrupted Olmsted's rarefied vision yet reveals the extent to which the park was as much the creation of a whole city and its people as the work of any single individual. In the final analysis it is the richness of social life—and its role in the material transformation of space—that dispels mythic conceptions of urban design and most effectively challenges those sectional interests that masquerade under the cloak of an imaginary public weal.