

The Extent of Limiting Human: Case Study of Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York, United States

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Abstract— Landscapes are perception of human eye, which shape, orient and structure the built form of a setting. Further, the landscape is a resultant of natural layers like topography, the larger context, climate of the region, etc. Thus the landscape of a setting is the collaborative response of the natural layers and the humane layers or the human interventions. The human interventions form the narrative envisaged for the place, which are the response to the idea of creating a view or a scape with respect to the larger idea of the designed scape, which forms the main intent (of the program) associated with the setting. These landscapes by the means of the extent of human intervention also exercise and notionally lay the grounds to communicate the exercise of power exerted by humans (rational) or an authority on the land (nature). Hence, the interaction or mixture of the two – human response or intervention and natural layers – or rather the role of rationality in molding the natural layers dictates the broader perception of the setting, be it rural (or natural) or ordered. Therefore, it is the extent to which human intervention or control on the scape of a setting, that informs its perception and the spirit of the place. Moreover, it is also the human constructs of the landscape and its subsequent response, which dictate and shape the response of the built form of the developing or developed urban fabric of the setting. However, in certain cases, it is also the interactions of the human construct and the response of the urban fabric, which weaves the overall larger response of the setting.

Index Terms— Calvert Vaux; Frederick Law Olmsted; landscape perceptions; landscape; Prospect Park; timeless landscape; urban landscape;

1 INTENT OF THE STUDY

THE study thus intends to understand the extent of human control, in the process of designing landscapes, for creating a scene (or rather a setting) that takes its values from a pastoral rural landscape. Further, Prospect park is chosen as an example for the case study, as the park was envisaged as a pastoral rural landscape within a (then) developing fabric of the city of Brooklyn by its designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux

2 THE EXTENT OF LIMITING HUMAN:PROSPECT PARK

Since the inception of Prospect Park, Brooklyn was the third largest populated country by 1860. During the time, immigrants, mostly poor exhibiting diversity in their culture, mainly occupied the area around the present day Prospect Park. At the same time, Calvert Vaux aware of the need of creating a park which would compete Central Park, informed by the pride of the citizens of Brooklyn and the anticipated growth of the city by its leaders, during a time when Brooklyn was an independent town, not yet joined to New York. It was he who laid the foundation of the park by defining the actual space, which would become Prospect Park. Looking at the initial plan of Prospect Park prepared by Egbert L. Viele, which had the Flatbush Avenue cutting across the park, Vaux convinced the authorities on selling the smaller piece of land on the north-eastern side and augmenting the south-western portion of the site, by purchasing more land on that end. The change further laid the ground for creating space for a large lake, meandering paths or ways and a long meadow. These elements, later, amalgamated together to create rural scenery for an urban pleasure ground. {1} Moreover in order to further, upscale the visual character of the setting, the proposal

by Olmsted and Vaux also incorporated transplantation of large trees using specialized equipment in order to recreate the "natural" setting. The Prospect Park which is a resultant of interactions amongst the lake, the rolling woodland and the expansive meadow, appear to have borrowed its characteristics from its initial character of the setting like the topography, the perception of an expanse, the fertile soil and the full grown trees. Further, in order to create a secluded rural atmosphere, the mounds and the woodlands along the periphery of the park acted as a buffer that protected the park from the hustle-bustle of the city and noise. It was also the mounds, which create vistas for viewing the city at certain junctures within the park. This gesture, adds a breathing window in a densely planted park.

"I suggest that the most striking and pleasing impression will be obtained if an approach can be made that shall have throughout a natural and comparatively wild and secluded character; its borders rich with the varied forms of vegetation, and with incidents growing out of the vicinity of springs and streams and pools, steep banks and rocks, all consistent with the sensation of passing through the remote depths of a natural forest."

—Frederick Law Olmsted to George W. Vanderbilt, July 12, 1889. [8]

During the 1800s, the parks were envisaged as (as put forward by Cleveland) "a leaven genuine love of nature" [7]. Moreover, besides the design narrative for the parks, during the time, it was also necessary to enlist the socio-political (or other narratives). Hence, the parks, which happened to be a complex system of not only the layers of nature (the existing) and the proposed constructs of the rational mind of the human, but also of the larger socio-political responses, which later imposed and dictated the responses within the larger built fabric. Further, the park developments marked the manifestation of the American anti-urbanism or a nostalgic response to the passing agrarianism and the rural life. [7] These

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developments are believed not be an imitation of the European models of gardens with nature as an artificer and naturally equal to art. On the contrary, it takes its roots from the English gardens, where were picturesque gardens – the idea of imitated nature. It is here that the landscape itself becomes the narrative, with the folding and the unfolding spaces along the movement lines and the station or viewpoint becoming the window to perceiving the parts of the narrative. The landscape thus becomes one with the narrative itself, in generating the spaces and developing the program for the setting. The necessity of park developments as an anti-urban model, derived from the need of a respite from the evils of the society, imposes “older pastoral values, three dimensionally, in the form of parklands, upon a basically hostile cityscape (as concluded by Ross L. Miller). [7]

This transition happens as one approaches the threshold of the old and the new view, which are the picturesque formations of the narrative envisaged by the designer. Moreover, in this case since the park was built on the grounds which already had landscape values and elements associated with it, the designer here uses it as an opportunity to paint a picture with using the then existing elements and drawing them to focus the eye towards the focal or station points elements. By doing so, the architect not only engraves a memory of the place or the setting, but also creates station points orienting the human within the setting. This is further controlled by the meandering movement lines, defined by the smoothly curved pathways, which further add to the dynamic character of the setting – with the gradual opening and closing of vistas or views, further shaped by the nature of approach of arriving at the station point.



Fig. 2 Plan of Bois de Boulogne, Paris

Fig. 2 View of the lower lake in Bois de Boulogne



Fig. 3 Aerial view of the site of Prospect Park in 1866



Fig. 4 Drawing of Battle Pass of the park site.

The urban park at Prospect Park, inspired from the man-made pastoral landscapes of the “People’s Park” in Birkenhead and the Bois de Boulogne at Paris designed by Joseph Paxton and Jacques Hittorff respectively, was envisaged by Olmsted as a series of opening and closing views, which changes to a new

Besides this, looking at the larger relationship of the park to city, it can be seen that the park gets grounded or tied down to fabric of the city by the connection it makes to the city, be it visually or notionally. Further, the visual connections, gets

further emphasized by the third dimension of topography and land modulations created along the edges of the park, besides leaving spaces for looking out at the city and frame views using landform and vegetation. It is at these junctures that elevate the emphasis of human sphere – the political, the social and the architectural realm. It is here that, in stark contrast to the Romans, Greeks or Mughals, the human intervention becomes important with the natural elements orienting itself towards it. Prospect Park, thus not only stand as a spectacular example furnishing a natural contrast within the urban – industrial or commercial order – of the city, but also asserts the essence and emphasis of human order over the natural. Moreover, it is also here that the two extreme conflicting aspects of the park “the extrovert nature of the city” and the “silence of the woods” are weaved together, to form a fabric of the “pastoral rural fabric of the setting past”. [8]

Further, the gradual visual transition offered by the approach pathways beside the “Long Meadow”, adds an element of surprise of a “revelation” towards the end or the window created by opening up of the movement line. This is achieved by the use of fine textured trees along the pathways and on the rolling woodlands contributes to the porosity of the, otherwise, enclosed space (enclosure created by dense plantation), which allows for a partial visual connection to the layers behind the foreground, thus adding a dimension of depth to the space. Stemming from this, the character of the meadow, in terms of perceiving the landform, appears to be a manifestation of nature, laid down as a memory of the topography of the battle pass mound. Besides this, in this case, the perception of creating a memoir of the past further lays the emphasis of the human intervention and the nature being a sub-ordinate to it.

Hence the essence of a place is elevated by the associations of meanings to the setting or associating memory to the past of the place. It is here, when the association emphasizes the need for the human to restore the connection. However, in doing so, related to an individualist approach of the human, derived from his experi-

ence and ideals, it envisages the narrative of a setting, however in doing so it picks up the larger form-based or visual traces of the original setting. Moreover, the need for reconnecting the past arises from the issues as perceived in the current scenario, further emphasizing the necessity of a human intervention within the setting. Hence the necessity of the human intervention arises from their on sheer need, stemming from the issues created by the human. And the subsequent nature of the intervention, in this case, also happens to be a construct, which is takes its layer of structuring from the human and elements used in making of the space from the nature, intending to reconnect to the past. It is this process of arriving to an approach, by reconnecting the layers of the past with the existing elements in order to nurture the future, which adds a layer of timelessness to certain projects.

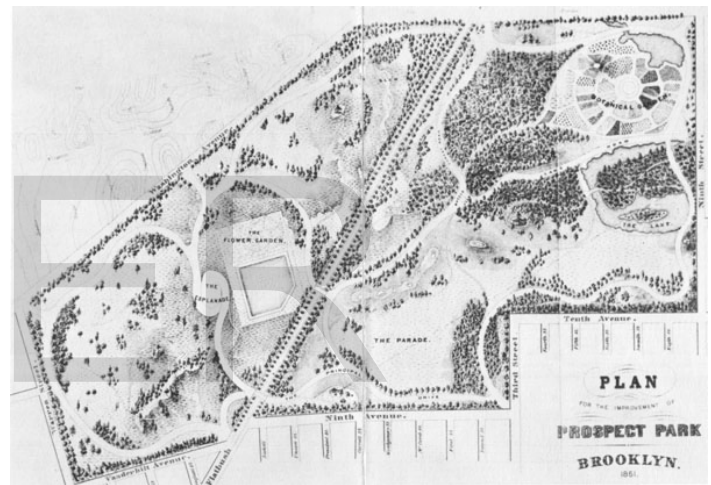


Fig. 5 Plan of Prospect Park made by Egbert L. Viele with the Flatbush Avenue bisecting through the site.



Fig. 6 An image taken through the "Long Meadow"



Fig. 7 Image of the site of Prospect Park taken during the initial survey in 1865.



Fig. 8 Plan of Prospect Park presented by Frederick L. Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1866



Fig. 9 A view through the entrance of Prospect Park



Fig. 10 Entrance to the park from Prospect Park



Fig. 11 Long Meadow from Prospect Park

CONCLUSION

The definition of past memories and experiences of the place setting lead to the idea of interconnecting the past to the future, through the medium of present setting. This association of memories of the past and future introduces a layer of timelessness to setting by means of human intervention. However, having said this, it doesn't imply that one needs to follow this methodology or approach for the association of the factor of time. This is one of the methodologies to achieve it. The idea of the paper is to re-look at the settings derived from human intervention or purely from nature in order to define the aspect of timelessness in landscapes or architecture as a whole. Could we start defining parameters, tool-kits or definitions that define or lead to the definition of timelessness in the built-environment? Are these associations purely a product of connections or perceptions? The idea of the paper is to raise these questions and attempt to understand this factor – time in the built-environment.

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