Two Sides of the Same Street:  
Depression-Era Photography of Central Park and Fifth Avenue

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by

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Introduction

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the spaces of Central Park and Fifth Avenue were canonized in literary works, musical productions, and visual culture. Over this time, they came to embody two of the most recognizable and iconic places in New York, the nation’s cultural and commercial capital, each representing key values associated with the country’s identity: Central Park, a symbol of democracy, and Fifth Avenue, a symbol of capitalist enterprise. Their significance cannot be satisfactorily understood as merely points on a map, but must instead be examined as spatial realms mediated by social and political considerations and whose meanings shifted as the city and its residents evolved. While there has been ample scholarship written on these spaces individually, there has been very little research that brings them into direct dialogue with one other. The central aim of this thesis is to draw them into a dialectic that explores their mutual influence and associations while revealing their role in shaping visions of a modern New York.

From the early-mid nineteenth century until today, there has perhaps been no period as transformative to Central Park and Fifth Avenue as the years spanning the Great Depression. The Depression halted three decades of tremendous change and offered New Yorkers an opportunity to gauge the changes and their meaning. As the Park became more accessible and frequented by the general public, Fifth Avenue transitioned from a boulevard filled with mansions to one lined with luxury hotel and apartment homes. Despite changes that were made to the Park in an effort to democratize its use, I argue
those modifications to the Park, coupled with the refashioning of Fifth Avenue, actually reinforced class differences in perceptions and experiences of the metropolis.

Throughout this thesis, I examine photographs of Central Park and Fifth Avenue, taken during the Depression and held at the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) and argue that they raise questions about what constituted city and park in this period. While each possesses distinct characteristics, these places were not mutually exclusive; Central Park was understood as a city park and the urban area surrounding the Park a pastoral city. I use the photographs at the boundary of Central Park and Fifth Avenue as an entry point to explore the cultural and urban discourse of the period. As representative templates for what I call the urban picturesque, they function as visual expedients in reconfiguring the potentialities of city and park as more than binary counterparts. I aim to broaden the concepts of “park” and “city” in order to reconsider their shared significance in the structuring of a modern metropolis. My analysis frames city and park as discursive spaces whose meaning is woven together through photographic constructions of visuality, site, and class structure.

The Park and City

In the early nineteenth century, American literary figures and urban theoreticians advocated for open spaces in cities. In the increasingly crowded and unhealthy urban environment, they thought that parks would provide citizens with tranquil retreats, serving as an antidote to the artificial space of the city and a place where people could reconnect with spiritual selves that had been lost in the mechanization of life and work. Further, parks would compensate for the shift from an agrarian society to an
industrialized one and would ease the need for urbanites to escape to their country home on the weekends.¹ One of the most outspoken proponents of this idea was the eminent nature poet and editor-in-chief of the populist newspaper, the New York Evening Post, William Cullen Bryant. On July 3, 1844, Bryant made his first official editorial plea for “A New Public Park” writing,

As we are now going, we are making a belt of muddy docks all around the island. We should be glad to see one small part of the shore without them, one place at least where the tides may be allowed to flow pure, and the ancient brim of rocks which borders the waters left in its original picturesqueness and beauty. Commerce is devouring inch by inch the coast of the island, and if we would rescue any part of it for health and recreation it must be done now.²

Bryant did not stand alone in his appreciation of unspoiled landscapes. Andrew Jackson Downing, landscape gardener and prolific writer, also championed a love for romantic, organic naturalism. Commonly referred to as the “Father of American Parks,” Downing was well known in his day for touting the virtues of rural improvement.³ He held an abiding faith in the power of landscape design, horticulture, and other agricultural pursuits to enhance the state of the American republic. In his thirty-six years of life, he exerted a tremendous amount of influence on his readers, educating them on refined taste and spurring them to carry out projects to improve public welfare. In 1850, he traveled to Europe and met English architect Calvert Vaux, who subsequently immigrated to the

¹ For a general discussion on this topic, see Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, 1st Oxford Uni. pbk. ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).


United States and partnered with Frederick Law Olmsted on the design of Central Park. When speaking of the Park’s origins, Olmsted credited Downing as its strongest impetus.  

Like Bryant and Downing, Olmsted believed that the city had adverse physical and psychological effects on its population. He held that parks provided picturesque vistas and places for quiet reflection and restoration, the perfect environment to counteract the stressful affects of the modern metropolis. Olmsted insisted that the only way to offset the ills of the city was to forge a distinct separation between city and park. To accomplish this differentiation, he planted abundant vegetation around the border of Central Park and implemented a strict set of rules that prohibited activities that disrupted the overall harmony of the natural landscape. The relationship between Central Park and New York City from the onset was thus a highly dichotomous one.

While most authorities on urban studies have historicized the relation between park and city in these terms, one scholar has suggested an alternate interpretation. In his 1975 book, Toward an Urban Vision, Thomas Bender argued that Olmsted and his contemporaries did not conceive of the relationship between the park and city as

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5 For insight into Olmsted’s philosophies and practice see Olmsted et al., Landscape into Cityscape; Frederick Law Olmsted’s Plans for a Greater New York City; Frederick Law Olmsted et al., Civilizing American Cities: a Selection of Frederick Law Olmsted’s Writings on City Landscapes. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971); Frederick Law Olmsted et al., The Formative Years, 1822 to 1852, The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted; v. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Frederick Law Olmsted et al., Creating Central Park, 1857-1861, The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, v. 3 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Frederick Law Olmsted et al., Parks, Politics, and Patronage 1874-1882, The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, v. 7 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Frederick Law Olmsted, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and Theodora Kimball Hubbard, Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903 (New York: G.P. Putnam’s, 1922).
oppositional, but rather as symbiotic. According to Bender, “American thinkers of that period were [not] simply anti-urban” but “were seeking a new understanding of city and country, art and nature, that would allow them to hold key values identified with each.”6 Bender rejects the idea that Americans saw the city as an illness to be cured by the country and instead asserts that they saw their relationship as a balance in which both sides were necessary and complementary.

In 1982 Galen Cranz, a scholar of social architecture and urban design, combined these interpretations in her book, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*. Cranz posits that the relationship between the park and city developed from Olmsted’s negative attitude to the more tolerant view suggested by Bender. According to Cranz, their views evolved as Americans changed how they “define[d] city problems and cities generally.” She argues that, by the 1930s, which she dubs “the recreation facility era,” “park functions reveal[ed] an increasingly positive and optimistic view of cities.”7 For Cranz, the park and city did not enter into an interdependent relationship until the Depression. The integration was partly a result of an increase in park attendance because of the extra free time that many people gained with the loss of work; but in Central Park, there was also another factor that significantly contributed to the coalescence of city and park. In the early 1930s, city planner Robert Moses launched an exhaustive rehabilitation program of the New York state parks systems. Under his auspices, Central Park was

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transformed into a mirror image of the city, identical in structure but with motives inversed.

While I use Cranz’s interpretation as a paradigm for my own analysis, my thesis offers a more nuanced view of the relationship between park and city. Whereas Cranz focuses on its evolution over time, I argue that perceptions of park and city, Central Park and Fifth Avenue, were contingent on spatial as well as temporal considerations. Attitudes towards the pastoral and the urban did not simply evolve from conflicting to harmonious, as Cranz has suggested. Rather, I contend that perceptions vary depending on the viewer’s physical and visual location and are specific to class and economic position. The photographs examined in this thesis attest to these situated conditions and provide tangible examples of shifts in perception. Thus, I aim to answer two central questions. How do understandings of the relationship between the Park and city vary depending on one’s placement within Central Park or on Fifth Avenue? Further, how do experiences of the Park change from different spaces and perspectives?

Throughout Central Park’s history, its shapers intended it to be a nucleus of democratic society. For Olmsted, democracy could be achieved through personal engagement with nature. He thought that the natural environment had a moralizing influence; in communing with nature, people would be inspired to philosophical contemplation that would foster a sense of order and civic virtue. When Moses became Parks Commissioner in the depths of the Depression, he eschewed Olmsted’s emphasis on the restorative powers of nature. Instead, Moses believed the democratic function of

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8 Olmsted et al., *Creating Central Park, 1857-1861*, 335.
Central Park could be realized through active forms of recreation. To fulfill his vision, Moses insisted on the need for recreational facilities that appealed to all social classes. He was pragmatic in his understanding of park design as an agent in the service of democratic ideals. Rather than take a universal approach, he recognized the need to meet the varied demands of the Park’s diverse users and thus inject the city’s heterogeneity into the space of the Park.

It is commonly believed that both Olmsted and Moses understood Central Park in its most fundamental state as a democratic place open and accessible to everyone. However, in light of my contention that social position and spatial orientation determines visual perspective and experiential knowledge, I am compelled to question the validity of this claim. Did Central Park realize Olmsted’s and Moses’s ideals of a democratic space? Did the Park stimulate interaction between people of different classes? How did experiences and perspectives from within the Park differ from those without, and was one privileged over the other? By examining photographs taken during the 1930s, I will investigate the degree to which this egalitarian ideal was realized.

**Visualizing Change**

During the Depression, photography played a significant role in documenting the conditions of the American landscape and shaping public consciousness. Unlike more ostensibly subjective media, photography, in its portability and immediacy, seemed to be an ideal medium to convey the cultural imperatives of everyday life. In New York and other locations in the United States, photographers created evocative portraits of place and time. They gave the camera the power to interpret, critique, and foreshadow
contemporary modes of thinking about the city and its relation to social form.

Photography’s potential was demonstrated through a broad range of channels including city planning reform organizations like the Regional Planning Association of New York, popular sources such as commercial advertisements, and artworks from photographic celebrities like Alfred Stieglitz and Berenice Abbott. In their works, photographers grappled with the changing circumstances and societal norms of modernity and how it affected Americans. They conceptualized what it meant to live in a modern world.

I use these practices to contextualize photographs from the MCNY’s digital collection. As artifacts of a specific time and place, I regard them as pictorial analyses of the ways in which people visualized and engaged with these places during the Depression. They are not only documents of the city’s continuous transformation, but are constitutive elements in the shaping of a new landscape. In his 1934 book *Technics and Civilizations*, Lewis Mumford praised photography’s power to congeal processes of transformation writing that it,

> gives the effect of permanence to the transient and the ephemeral: photography—and perhaps photography alone—is capable of coping with and adequately presenting the complicated, inter-related aspects of our modern environment.⁹

Viewing photographs in this way, I infuse the images with new meanings informed by their participation in a broader discourse about the remaking of a twentieth-century New York.

These photographs also belong to a larger archive of images held in many of New York’s most prominent institutions. When first setting out on this project, I searched

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through the New York Public Library, the New York Historical Society, and the New York Department of Records online collections and archives databases in addition to the MCNY. I discovered that not only is the MCNY’s collection representative of images found at other sites, but also that it contains photographic material not located elsewhere. The ubiquity of Central Park and Fifth Avenue images from the 1930s found in these collections bespeaks their value as items of New York’s cultural and historical patrimony.

The images that I examine in this thesis do not comprise the full scope of photographic representations of Central Park and Fifth Avenue nor do they wholly encapsulate the significance of the places they picture. In respect to an archive, American photographer and critic, Allan Sekula pointed out that photographs need to be understood as parts of a larger whole. They are products of particular perspectives understood through their contextual framework. In photographic archives, he wrote, “meaning is liberated from use, and yet at a more general level an empiricist model of truth prevails. Pictures are atomized, isolated in one way and homogenized in another.”

Although the photographs I have studied in this thesis are not extracted from an archive, Sekula’s statements illuminate the often times problematic nature of working with photographic collections and the delicacy with which interpretations must be approached. The photographs explored in this text are emblematic of a specific time and place, but they are only fragments of the visual and historical thought of the period. They can only obtain

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validity if recognized as pieces to a puzzle and not as autonomous and comprehensive representations.

Sekula goes on to explain; “the machine establishes its truth, not by logical argument, but by providing an experience.”¹¹ The camera, in other words, achieves its efficacy by transporting viewers to a place or time in the past that they have not encountered in reality. As Sekula suggests, I do not assess the value of the photographs based on a concern for objective truth, but rather for their capacity to communicate specific ways of looking at and experiencing space. Further, I recognize the extent to which these photographs lend themselves to interpretation. Only seen through the frame of a camera, the interplay between Central Park and Fifth Avenue presented in these photographs does not summarize the totality of their relationship. Nevertheless, I argue that the photographs contribute to a narrative of the city’s progression, and I analyze them as authentic memories of a particular moment in space and time.

Although the biographies of the photographers (the Byron Company, the Wurts Brothers, Samuel Gottscho, and Mark Nadir) are not a focus of this thesis, I would like to mention their practice briefly. The Wurts Brothers, Samuel Gottscho, and the Byron Company were commercial firms, and the vast majority of their photographs were commissions.¹² The Byron Company has received the most critical attention, its work

¹¹ Ibid., 448.

making appearances in numerous texts on the visual history of New York City. The Wurts Brothers and Samuel Gottscho are less well-known photographers, but their production during this time greatly exceeded that of the Byron Company. Out of the four photographers, Gottscho produced the largest number of photographs of Central Park and Fifth Avenue during this period. I have little information about the fourth photographer, Mark Nadir. He worked in the Federal Art Project during the Depression, indicating that he had some experience with photography, but it is difficult to establish the nature and extent of his practice.13

In the chapters that follow, I investigate these photographers’ work in terms of two contrasting views of Central Park and Fifth Avenue. In chapter one I examine photographs taken from within the bounds of Central Park and argue that they suggest a strong connection to nineteenth-century conceptions of the Park’s purpose (Figure 0.1). I trace the Park’s development from its origins to when Robert Moses took office in the 1930s, and illuminate important facets of class politics that substantially influenced the Park’s design. By comparing the Depression-era Central Park to the nineteenth-century Park designed by Olmsted and Vaux, I show how aesthetic decisions made by the planners and photographers hindered a view of the Park as fully modernized and in concert with the urban city. Chapter two examines photographs taken from the heights of

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Fifth Avenue apartments (Chapter 0.2). I argue that this perspective challenged Moses’
_attempts to make experiences of the Park completely equitable and afforded Fifth Avenue
residents optical advantages that reinforced their social privilege. In the conclusion, I
evaluate what the photographs reveal about how Americans understand Central Park and
its function and explore how they resonate with current concerns about the complex
relationship between the Park and the avenue.
Figure 0.1. Samuel H. Gottscho, *Central Park and Fifth Avenue at 60th Street*, c. 1930, gelatin silver print, 8 x 11 in., Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 0.2. Samuel H. Gottscho, *New York City Views. View Towards Central Park West Over Central Park from Hotel St. Moritz, Terrace*, 1932, acetate negative, 7 x 5 in., Museum of the City of New York.
Chapter I: The Space Within

During the Depression, artistic and commercial photographers shot many views within Central Park. With its contrasts of natural and built environments and nodes of energetic and passive activity, Central Park offered dynamic perspectives that reflected a transformational moment in the history of the city’s landscape. Through the examination of Depression-era photographs taken in this space, I detect both a residual sentimentality and fearful apprehension that defied the flourishing progressivism of the early twentieth century. In their combination of documentary and pictorial conventions, they expose the tensions that arose when Manhattan shifted from being a nineteenth-century city to a profoundly modern one. Whether promoting Central Park as a space of romantic escapism or aggrandizing the glory of the built environment, the photographs discussed in this chapter illustrate a new view of Central Park as a metropolitan park.

As New York City continued to modernize in the 1930s, the growing urban landscape posed an increasing threat to the purity of the park movement. In the nineteenth century, when the idea for an American park was first promulgated, the division between Park and city was easily maintained, as buildings were relatively low in scale and could not be seen from within the confines of the Park’s borders. By the third decade of the century, skyscrapers had risen across American cities and reached previously unimaginable heights. For the first time, citizens were forced to confront a vertical vision of the city inside of the Park. While some artistic visionaries eagerly embraced this shift, others were hesitant to fully accept its emergence and the realities
that came in tow. As a product of old New York urban planning, Central Park proves to be an interesting barometer with which to measure these changes.

I begin this examination with a photograph taken by Samuel Gottscho in 1932\(^{14}\) (Figure 1.1). A man sits alone on grassy mound surrounded by untrimmed bushes, his silhouette almost engulfed by their branches. Two slender trees frame him and stretch upward to match the height of the skyline, their verticality evoking an affinity between the natural and artificial realms. With sparse foliage and delicate branches, the trees and bushes do not present a charming vision of the Park, but rather, their primitive quality denotes a sense of abandonment. In comparison, the buildings that form the background are composed of sleek, sharp, and geometric lines. The resulting effect is a rugged, fragile landscape that contrasts with the developed urban buildings that stand firmly erect in the background. This opposition exposed a new condition in the city. From the time of the Industrial Revolution, New York City had undergone rapid expansion until the Depression when development halted due to the financial crisis. In the early period of this expansion, most building was concentrated downtown in the central business district. As evidenced in this photograph, however, by the 1930s construction had spread to midtown, culminating in the construction of the Empire State Building (1930) and the Chrysler Building (1931). In Gottscho’s photograph, the Park seems to compete with the invading cityscape by means of its untamed undergrowth and vertical tree trunks. Despite its

\(^{14}\) Samuel H. Gottscho began his career as a professional photographer in 1925. He was commissioned by architects, artists, and New York City’s social elite through 1955 and appeared in several major publications such as *House Beautiful* and *Home and Garden*. He is remembered for his vivid portrayals of the New York skyline and celebration of New York’s finest skyscrapers such as the American Radiator Building and Rockefeller Center. See Albrecht and Gottscho, *The Mythic City*; “Samuel H. Gottscho.”
wildness however, the Park fails to obliterate the formidable power of the urban cityscape.

As an adherent to the belief in the supreme powers of unspoiled nature, Olmsted would not have approved of this version of the Park. One of his main concerns when first developing his philosophies about the project was that the Park be shielded from its urban surroundings: “For the purposes of concealing the houses on the opposite side of the street, from the park” he wrote in 1858, “it is proposed, as will be seen in the plan, to plant a line of trees around the outer edge of the park” because without doing so, “it is feared that it will be difficult to prevent this boundary line of the park from having contracted a somewhat mean appearance.”15 The bulky structures of the Pierre Hotel, the Sherry-Netherland, the Savoy-Plaza, and the Squibb Building (from left to right) featured in Gottscho’s image challenge Olmsted’s original vision for the Park.

Despite Olmsted’s intentions to obscure the urban skyline, skyscrapers could now be seen from most locations within Central Park as conspicuous and permanent fixtures of the city. In fact, one of the only places skyscrapers could be seen in their entirety was the interior of the Park because it provided the range of vision necessary to capture the great height of the towers. In another view from Gottscho, the buildings on Fifth Avenue seem to be somewhat more integrated into the overall landscape of the Park (Figure 1.2). I would like to note, however, that in his representation, Gottscho does not stress the height of the buildings, (as was conventional in 1930’s urban portraiture), by allowing them to push the boundaries of the pictorial frame. Instead, he composed a scene in

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15 Olmsted et al., Landscape into Cityscape; Frederick Law Olmsted’s Plans for a Greater New York City., 71.
which the abundant natural growth takes up the majority of the composition and extends beyond the limits of the lens’s frame format. The Park once again fights for authority over the modern skyline but this time manages to subdue the overwhelming power of multi-story buildings. The bucolic Park gives the structures an impression of calmness and tranquility, almost seeming to naturalize them as organic outcroppings of the natural landscape.

These two photographs by Gottscho express ambivalence toward a new vision of Central Park in which the synthetic materials of concrete and metal became unavoidable and indelible elements in the Park vistas. Until the late 1920s, New York was primarily conceived in horizontal terms. Even with the erection of the city’s first skyscrapers at the end of the nineteenth century, artists visualized New York as a horizontal expanse of logical and ordered networks, a vision derived from the foundations of urban planning that the city was built upon, namely the 1811 grid plan. In this plan, the metropolis was organized along horizontal lines through partitioning streets into block segments. Throughout the nineteenth century, three reoccurring trends in the visual representation of New York emerged; the city viewed from across the harbor, the city from a birds-eye perspective, and towards the end of the century, the silhouette of the skyline view.\textsuperscript{16} In each one of these genres, the city was pictured in profile, its horizontality accentuated. In their essay, “Culture and Architecture: Some Aesthetic Tensions in the Shaping of Modern New York City,” Thomas Bender and William Taylor assert, “The city, in such

views, is a mountain range, the ensemble is perceptually more important than the individual peaks.”

This obsession with horizontalism that dominated the vision of nineteenth and early twentieth-century New Yorkers was rooted in an understanding that civic monumentality, grand pronouncements of the city’s dignified public spirit, occurred along a horizontal axis, Central Park perhaps being the most ambitious expression of this idea. Architectural historian Merrill Schleier has also suggested that the attachment to horizontal ways of seeing can be traced to a tradition of landscape painting. When the vertical form first came into view, artists “sought an artistic vocabulary which accorded with accepted notions of taste.” In order to make sense of this novel form, they often attributed conventions from the genre of landscape painting to the vertical tower. Most frequently they relied on elements of the picturesque such as hazy tonality and soft focus as a means to aestheticize the modern city. Instead of inventing a new language of representation that accommodated vertical vision, artists adapted the vertical form to an already established mode of horizontality.

Not until the Depression did the perception shift to include an acceptance of verticality. One of the first, and possibly the most influential, projections of the vertical urban form was Berenice Abbott’s 1935 photographic survey for the Federal Art Project,

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18 Ibid., 190.

Changing New York. In works like *Canyon: Broadway and Exchange Place*, Abbott employs disorienting perspectives and jarring angles to emphasize the mammoth proportions of the steel structures (Figure 1.3). Her photographs take the interlaced matrixes of geometric lines and shapes conventionally associated with the horizontal plane and turn them perpendicular to rationalize the skyward thrust of the city. In one sense, Abbott’s composition aligns upward growth with ideas of modern advancement and inverts the notion of monumentality to include and even celebrate vertical dimensions. More commonly however, Abbott’s cropped representations are construed as a critique of the isolating and unsettling effects that the modern metropolis has upon the streetwalker.\(^{20}\) The skyscrapers looming presence conveyed a foreboding impression about their relationship to humanity and as representations of the future. Projects such as Abbott’s were hugely significant because they helped establish a new way of envisioning and relating to the city.

The gridded hotel buildings behind Central Park as seen in Gottscho’s photographs, pose a sharp contrast to the amorphous forms of the natural landscape. They trouble this specific location in New York intentionally set against regularized patterns of city blocks through the inclusion of sinuous pathways and asymmetrical designs. Unlike Abbott’s representations, Gottscho’s photographs of the New York skyline do not geometrize our entire field of vision. Their appearance softened by the natural environment, the buildings’ immensities are not quite as exaggerated and awe-inspiring

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as those of Abbott. The photographs evoke a sentimental nostalgia for a time when Central Park was primarily understood as a picturesque space for quiet contemplation, as exemplified by the two isolated men seemingly lost in reverie.

This being said, however, they are not quite as inimical to the vertical form as works by artists from the early part of the century. As opposed to the indistinct focus utilized by his predecessors, Gottscho applies a precise clarity to his practice that was characteristic of Depression era photography. In straight photography, according to John Raeburn, artists employed a “pinpoint focus that crisply define[d] the objects portrayed, a lucid delineation of tonality, and lighting that emphasize[d] the image’s overall brilliance and clarity.” Raeburn argued that the proclivity towards straight photography was due to a widespread desire on behalf of the art world “to enlarge its [photography’s] ambit and increase its visibility.” He explained that,

> The legibility and technical finesse of straight photographs would be more likely than experimental ones to find sympathetic viewers among the larger public that photographers and impresarios hoped to cultivate. The revolution they proclaimed was cultural rather than esthetic, and straight photography served it admirably.22

Within the context of this explanation, Gottscho’s photographs do not attempt to mediate the skyscrapers’ invasion into the Park through pictorialist techniques but rather affirm the arrival of a new reality using high contrast and crisp focus. The romantic mood articulated in these images is more a product of specific location than of artistic manipulation. Other photographs, such as one by the Wurts Brothers of the Essex House

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22 Ibid.
at 59th Street, demonstrate the emergence of the skyscraper in more intense and immediate ways (Figure 1.4). Like Abbott, the Wurts Brothers photographer uses dramatic angles to evoke a startling response to the incursion of the urban tower. Flanked by tree branches, the structure almost seems to have a lopsided tilt. Its slanted appearance not only challenges its structural stability, but also alludes to apprehensions about twentieth-century modernity. The highly expressive reactions of Gottscho and the Wurts Brothers suggest a hesitation to accept the urban cityscape into the natural scenery. This resistance necessitates further exploration, which I will begin with the origins of Central Park.

The Origins of Central Park

As scholars of urban landscape design have explained, the American park emerged out of two traditions. First, it is derived from the great parks of Europe like the English landscape garden and, later, the popular pleasure garden. In these spaces, Europeans created an environment of idealized nature with classically inspired

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23 The Wurts Brothers studio was founded in 1894 by brothers Norman and Lionel Wurts and was one of New York’s first architectural photography firms. The Company cultivated relationships with a prestigious clientele of architects, developers, and contractors—the most notable of them being Cass Gilbert who commissioned them for a photographic survey on the construction of the Woolworth Building from 1910-1913. They worked steadily throughout the first half of the twentieth century photographing a wide range of buildings, both commercial and residential. In addition to street views, the Wurts Bros. photographed commercial and domestic interiors as well. Their images appeared in many magazines and other print material until 1979 when Richard Wurts, Lionel’s son, retired and closed the studio. “Wurts Bros.”

architecture and meandering paths. While American travelers admired the private gardens of European gentlemen as models for their own country homes, they were also intrigued by the more public spaces of pleasure gardens like Vauxhall Gardens, which were open to anyone who had the price of admission and included socially interactive recreations. Second, Central Park was inspired by the Transcendentalist movement, a tradition more firmly entrenched in an American ethos. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau emphasized nature’s sublime power to restore the mental and physical health of individuals who had been corrupted by organized institutions like religion and politics. “In the presence of nature,” Emerson wrote, “a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says,—he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me.”

This type of thinking at the heart of the park movement was especially attractive during the Depression when faith in religious and political power began to dwindle and Americans looked for new sources of inspiration and comfort.

The narrative of Central Park however, is more politically, socially, and economically complex than either of these historical traditions suggest. In *The Park and the People*, Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar chronicle the manifold complexities of the inception and development of Central Park through the mid-twentieth century.

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25 For more on European parks see Chadwick, *The Park and the Town; Public Landscape in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Chapters 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8.


27 Park attendance during the Depression was partly inspired by the “back-to nature” movement, which believed the natural environment retained virtues perverted in the urban city. See Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 242.
century.\textsuperscript{28} They explain that from the onset, Central Park was conceived out of a “mix of motivations, to make money, to display the city’s cultivation, to lift up the poor, to refine the rich, to advance commercial interests, to retard commercial development, to improve public health, to curry political favor, to provide jobs.”\textsuperscript{29} According to Rosenzweig and Blackmar, an American, Robert Minturn, initiated the creation of Central Park, having identified the need for a park similar to those across the Atlantic after returning from trip to Europe in the summer of 1849.\textsuperscript{30} He believed that adding a park to the country’s greatest city would imbue America’s reputation with the sophistication commonly attributed to European culture and would burnish the elite character of New York’s most distinguished citizens.\textsuperscript{31}

Once other affluent New York gentlemen received word about the possible construction of a Park, speculative interest ensued quickly. After Senator James William Beekman declared that wealthy citizens who owned property adjacent to the Park (therefore receiving the greatest perquisites) should bear the financial burden of its construction, those landowners spun counter rhetoric about the benefits of the Park for lower-class citizens. As the project developed, downtown residents spoke out against a


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 15–17.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 26, 36.
Park that would have no benefit to them as they lived too far away from the proposed site and transportation systems did not yet reach the Park.\footnote{Ibid., 20-23.}

Park advocates alleged that open space would provide access to fresh air in the industrialized city and would act as means for acculturating the immigrant and proletariat populations.\footnote{Ibid., 99–110.} Convinced by these arguments, the city government conceded to splitting taxation between adjacent landowners and the general populace of New York City, but it also demanded that the Park be centrally located so as to be available to the largest number of people, hence Central Park’s final placement between 5\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} avenues.\footnote{Ibid., 40.} Even with the new “inclusive” focus, the wealthy class’s willingness to include working-class residents in the Park was tinged with a patronizing classism that hardly lived up to their altruistic declarations. Such lip service carried into the lofty promises made by the Park’s first designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.\footnote{For biography and discussions of Vaux’s practice, see, Calvert Vaux, \textit{Villas and Cottages: A Series of Designs Prepared for Execution in the United States} (London: S. Low, and Marston, 1867); Francis R Kowsky, \textit{Country, Park & City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).}

In 1857 the Common Council of New York issued a call for proposals for Central Park. Out of thirty-three submissions, the “Greenswards” plan submitted by Olmsted and Vaux won the commission (Figure 1.5). In their plan the pair sketched out a detailed arrangement of the components they believed were required for a democratic park and
made notes for future developments that could be added as the city’s population grew and demands on the Park amplified.

Their textual description begins with the southern boundary of the Park and works its way upward to the northern boundary at 106<sup>th</sup> street (not yet extended to the 110<sup>th</sup> street line that now forms the northern edge). Out of all the Park’s functions, Olmsted and Vaux emphasized the inherent qualities of the landscape.\textsuperscript{36} Ideally, the Park should have been a continuous stretch of green pasture and rocky terrain with no interfering roads. The commission, however, required crossroads, without which they felt the Park would create a barrier in the city, and the designers were forced to incorporate traffic circulation into their scheme. In order to retain the pastoral quality of the Park and shield pedestrians from noisy traffic, Olmsted and Vaux sunk the roads below the ground’s surface and built up walls on either side (Figure 1.6).\textsuperscript{37}

After establishing the functionally necessary roadways, the designers laid out the lower end of the Park beginning with what they called the Promenade and then the Mall (Figure 1.7, Figure 1.8). This space was a walkway for daytime promenaders that featured, according to Olmsted, “so many elements of grandeur and magnificence, that it should be recognized as an essential feature in the arrangement of any large park.”\textsuperscript{38} To the west of this avenue, they proposed two open spaces, the parade ground, known as The Green and now Sheep Meadow, and a cricket ground to the south (see Figure 1.8).

\textsuperscript{36} Olmsted et al., \textit{Landscape into Cityscape; Frederick Law Olmsted’s Plans for a Greater New York City.}, 65.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 73.
Running between the two was a transverse road at 65th Street. With the sunken road separating the playground from the parade ground, fluid movement through the middle of the two was essentially obstructed and to reach one space from the other pedestrians were forced to circle around the outer pathway.

The cricket ground was located in proximity to the Sixth and Eight Avenue railways on which people would travel from downtown—a consideration not mentioned in reference to the adjacent parade ground. Cricket, however, was not the type of play the working-class patrons were interested in. Further, the omnibuses and horsecars that brought downtowners uptown were costly, time consuming and by and large impractical for regular use. Without an efficient transportation system, people needed to be close to their work around the port areas. Only wealthy merchant families could afford to move uptown and take private carriage rides to the lower end of the island when necessary.

Moving northward, Olmsted and Vaux charted out less and less territory for recreational use, instead devoting their attention to creating harmonious prospects within the natural landscape. Both of the lakes on the lower portion of the Park, used as a skating ponds during the winter months or for boating when weather permitted, were surrounded by walking paths to allow visitors the option of strolling, picnicking, or relaxing while taking in the pleasant views (Figure 1.9). Beyond the old and new reservoir, another playground was planned (see Figure 1.8). In the 1868 reprint of the

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39 I use the term “railway” because this is what Olmsted used to refer to transportation systems at the time. It should be noted that it was not a railway in the modern sense of the word like trains or subways. Mid-nineteenth century railways were horse-drawn trams. It was not until the late nineteenth century that electric-powered streetcars began to replace older forms of transportation.

40 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, The Park and the People, 6–7.
proposal, Olmsted and Vaux added a footnote that explained the actual destiny of this space. Instead of being covered in grass, the ground was sectioned off as a formal flower garden to hold a music-hall, museums, and horticulture center, activities that appealed only to the upper-class residents of Manhattan.\textsuperscript{41} When this space was assigned an alternate purpose, the Park planners moved activities from the secondary playground to The Green in the lower portion of the Park. As a result, the Park was essentially divided in two: the lower portion used for more physical types of recreation and the upper half allotted for quiet ambles among nature or cultured pursuits such as museum or arboretum visits. This divisional approach became a mainstay in Olmsted’s practice of landscape design. In planning for South Park in Chicago in 1871, Olmsted wrote,

Disregarding here very small places we thus show a necessity for two classes of grounds, one characterized by broad, nearly level spaces of turf suitable for reviews and athletic exercises…the other, not designed to be artificially lighted nor to be used at night, adapted only to quiet and moderate exercises; in which shrubbery, underwood and brooding trees may be common elements of scenery, and if circumstances admit of it, what is technically styled the picturesque in distinction from the simply beautiful in nature may be cultivated.\textsuperscript{42}

When Olmsted writes of “two classes,” he is not merely denoting classifications of the landscape like arboreal species or topographical layout, but to a more nuanced degree is asserting a distinction between two spaces of social classes. In Central Park, this division was manifested in various ways. For example, in the early years the Park was open for walking, but was primarily navigated by the carriages of the wealthy (Figure 1.10).

\textsuperscript{41} Olmsted et al., \textit{Landscape into Cityscape; Frederick Law Olmsted’s Plans for a Greater New York City}, 82.

\textsuperscript{42} Olmsted, \textit{Civilizing American Cities; a Selection of Frederick Law Olmsted’s Writings on City Landscapes}, 169–70.
Carriage rides in the Park were considered an alternative to the promenades that used to take place on streets like Broadway, but that had been overrun with the lower classes.\textsuperscript{43} Throughout the Park, carriage drives were constructed so that aristocratic promenaders could continue their afternoon tradition without interference from the annoyances of the city street.

Insomuch as promenading involved flaunting oneself and one’s material possessions, it required the admiring gaze of others, such as members of the lower class who did not own carriages themselves but were expected to appreciate the spectacle. In addition, Olmsted and Vaux hoped that by exposing the working class to elite standards of decorum they would be educated on proper and respectable behavior, giving benefits to society as a whole. To encourage this transaction, they proposed footpaths to run alongside the carriage rides so that “pedestrians may have ample opportunity to look at the equipages and their inmates”\textsuperscript{44} (Figure 1.11).

In this way the Park served as a platform for public edification—a premise that fulfilled the civic obligations the Park planners pledged to satisfy. Of the two, Olmsted was particularly confident that mere exposure to genteel deportment would cultivate cosmopolitan taste among the working class and establish a common standard of social mores:

\textsuperscript{43} Rosenzweig and Blackmar, \textit{The Park and the People}, 27.

\textsuperscript{44} Olmsted et al., \textit{Landscape into Cityscape; Frederick Law Olmsted’s Plans for a Greater New York City.}, 87.
No one who has closely observed the conduct of the people who visit the Park, can doubt that it exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and most lawless classes of the city,—an influence favorable to courtesy, self-control, and temperance.45

Olmsted understood this transaction as a form of stewardship, a model of urban governance in which the city’s elite were responsible for moralizing and educating the poor on proper behavior. Under the tutelage and discipline of genteel reformers, the working class was civilized. Stewardship embraced class hierarchy as a structure for civic education.46 While Olmsted endorsed the potentialities of civic enhancement, he did not go so far as to say that, by way of this enhancement, citizens would have the opportunity to climb the social ladder. Unlike his partner Vaux, Olmsted belonged to the camp that believed social stratification was fixed and attempts at social elevation to a higher caste were unrealistic.47 Nonetheless, Olmsted remained loyal to his convictions that stewardship would be enough to hold civic value.

Previous examinations of Olmsted’s theories have overlooked the disconnection between classes that his model intimates. While he made arrangements to facilitate simultaneous occupation of the Park by upper and lower classes, his program of stewardship in no way guarantees any sort of intermingling. Rather, the type of moral education he proposed is purely observational. What is more, his theories on the educational merits of the Park assert suppositions about the divergent intellectual

45 Olmsted, Civilizing American Cities; a Selection of Frederick Law Olmsted’s Writings on City Landscapes., 96.


47 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, The Park and the People, 139.
capabilities of the aristocratic and proletarian populations. Whereas the wealthy class could be uplifted on an individual basis through introspection, the urban working class had to be instructed in order to achieve betterment, implying that they were incapable of growth not only within themselves but also within their class. To understand this more completely, I want to explore the relationship between work and leisure that informed Central Park’s status.

Work and Leisure in Twentieth-Century New York

For nineteenth-century patricians, Central Park symbolized personal success and rightful privilege. Escape into nature was less about mental and physical benefits than it was about the ability to spend one’s time on unproductive pursuits. In his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen defines the elite coterie of New York as the “non-industrial” class whose “pervading principle and abiding test of good breeding is the requirement of a substantial and patent waste of time.” 48 This class had time to waste, a reality that was unknown to the working class who spent most of their hours at factory jobs. The leisure class was defined by their detachment from the products of industrial labor and association with luxury items.

In the twentieth century New York’s proletariat was able to take part in leisure activities when they finally gained the money and time due to the establishment of labor laws. It was their investment in the demands of labor that defined their relationship to leisure. To counteract the monotonous tasks that constituted modern work, unskilled

laborers sought out forms of entertainment that would activate and enliven their creative capacities of the mind. As they hardly had the privilege of escaping the city altogether like the country gentlemen of greater fortune, it was vital that they be able to exercise their mind and body in places close to home.⁴⁹

When the Depression began, the association between work and leisure became even more fraught with class politics. By the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt won the presidential election in 1933, the United States had extremely high numbers of unemployed people, thirteen to fifteen million, accounting for well over 20 percent of the nation’s population.⁵⁰ Time spent in Central Park was no longer an escape from the workplace, but also symptomatic of the loss of work. For the elite, leisure set apart from work represented personal success and special reprieve. For working-class people, flocking to the greenery of Central Park symbolized desperation as a consequence of joblessness, not because they could afford to be without work. Leisure defined by an absence of labor went from bearing a positive connotation to a negative reflection of hopeless despair. In the nineteenth century, when the Park was justified as a remedy for the effects of industrialism, it did not carry the associations with despondency that it accrued during the Depression. While the conditions that industrialization brought were unfavorable, they represented progress and a prospering economy.⁵¹

Returning to Gottscho’s images (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2), I discern two different representations of the Park within the context of the Depression. In Figure 1.1, Pine Trees


and Fifth Avenue Buildings, there is a sense of bleakness presented. Although bearing a slight grin, the man featured in the photograph sits on the ground surrounded by leafless shrubs and a somewhat decimated landscape. This representation suggests that his visit to the Park is symbolic of misfortune. Figure 1.2, Grand Army Plaza Buildings from Central Park, 2, on the other hand is comparatively more optimistic. The man sits on a bench facing fully bloomed trees that wind around a paved pathway, leaving little evidence of the Depression and the despair it caused. The raggedness of the city is virtually indiscernible below the glory of the Fifth Avenue buildings. While both images attest to the changing physical landscape, Figure 1.2 seems more informed by Gottscho’s training as a commercial photographer. It reads like an advertisement that sells the myth of a romanticized, beautiful life free from the ills of a relentlessly gridlocked urban society.

Central Park in the 1930s

In the decades leading up to the Depression, Central Park continued to serve as an arena for moral inculcation but in the 1930s it took on new responsibilities. Finding themselves with more free time due to shorter work weeks and reduced daily hours, Americans eagerly embraced recreation that was free of charge. For this reason, parks became a main focus of leisure development and attendance. At the height of the Depression in 1931, recreation reformer Joseph Lee celebrated the democratization of leisure in an issue of Playground and Recreation writing:
Leisure for everybody, a condition that we in America are now approaching, is a new thing under the sun—the most revolutionary thing that ever happened. It means the coming of something unheard of in all history—the opportunity for every man to live.52

It was no longer enough for the Park to provide spaces for socialization and observation. The recreation movement, a social welfare campaign that emphasized the psychological, physical, and social benefits of active play for children and adults had influenced the educational faculties of the Park. Attitudes towards public well-being were widely liberalized, inciting city government and well-to-do residents with political clout to advocate for the upkeep, expansion, and improvement of the parks system. For Central Park this meant the addition of many new playgrounds and recreational facilities. The government and influential plutocrats feared that if they were not provided these facilities, the unemployed working class would have more time to stir up trouble on the city streets.53

Urban planner Robert Moses was one of the leaders of the recreation movement, and one of his signature achievements was the improvement of Central Park. After years of working in political administration, Moses was appointed Park Commissioner in 1934. When he first took the job, Central Park was in a state of deterioration. Many of its facilities had not been updated in years and its greenery had grown wild without the constant attention of gardeners to manicure the grounds. There was even a Hooverville, a squatter settlement of makeshift shacks, set up on the site of the dried-up lower reservoir


53 Cutler, The Public Landscape of the New Deal, 5.
(Figure 1.12). Within the first twelve months of office, Moses dramatically altered the landscape and character of Central Park. He added over twenty playgrounds, a number of baseball diamonds and sports fields, wading pools, bathhouses, transformed the dilapidated menagerie into a legitimate zoo, and turned the Hooverville into what is now known as “The Great Lawn.”

During the Depression, Moses was presented with a unique challenge in his efforts to improve the City’s parks. Due to the municipal government’s waning tax revenue, there was little money available for public programs. To compensate for this shortage, Moses turned to federally sponsored relief programs for financial support, including the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the Works Progress Administration. Thanks to the CWA, a federal program that granted loans to the state, Moses was able to employ hundreds of men for the rehabilitation of Central Park. Moses did not have much trouble procuring funds from these agencies, as land regeneration was one of the central missions of the New Deal. Recreation alone accounted for “the third greatest sum of federal money out of fourteen different categories of building” and by 1936, New York City had accrued one-

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55 Ibid., 372.

seventh of the WPA’s total allocations.57 Under Moses’ leadership, the city hired seventy thousand unemployed workers on parks projects.58

In addition to men hired as manual laborers for the renovation and maintenance of the Park grounds, Moses employed trained recreation specialists to advise over playgrounds and recreational facilities. By the 1930s, recreation was expanded to include, and emphasize, the concept of play. Led by recreation reformers Joseph Lee and John Dewey, playground advocates considered play critical to a child’s physical and emotional development.59 They believed that play, in and of itself, was educational, and thus purposeful. It was a tool that encouraged people to succeed in their performance, and was therefore directly linked to the advancement of social progress. In a 1965 article, Recipe for Better Parks, Moses declared,

> We must pay more attention to the severage age groups and to passive, as distinguished from active, recreation…Prosperity without prudent control, physical growth without regulation in the common interest, movement without plan or purpose, pursuit of happiness with no common objective, prolongation of life without cultivation of leisure, this is not civilization. Parks are the outward visible symbols of democracy. That, in my book, is what they are for.60

Moses was committed to transforming the Park into a place that embraced the progressive ideals of the recreation movement while still serving the interests of its older

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57 Cutler, The Public Landscape of the New Deal, 10.

58 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, The Park and the People, 460.


visitors. For him, parks satisfied their role as moral breeding grounds through active recreation, not only passive observation.

In this model of the progressive Park, the responsibility of rearing respectable character traits among the lower-class populations shifted from the hands of the wealthy elite, whose influence was more or less inadvertent and certainly aloof, to the hands of specialized recreation leaders who carried out their duties through direct involvement. \(^{61}\) Central Park’s focus shifted from the aesthetic aspects of arcadian appreciation to the priority of utilitarian function. As Culter has so aptly stated, “The era romanticizes not the place, but the purpose of the place.” \(^{62}\) Cranz posits that this model of park management, in which recreation was highly systematized, reflects the paradigm of industrial life. \(^{63}\) In the city, factory work and personal life were structured through schedules and daily duties. Similarly, the recreational Park included organized activities such as marching drills, dance classes, and sports competitions. In this view, the fabric of the metropolis was unified through an amalgam of the urban and pastoral. Active leisure reflected an urban pattern of living and thus, the city was injected into the life of the Park.

The Periphery of Central Park

With these factors in mind, it is curious that photographs shot on the edges of Central Park did not reflect the heightened activity occurring elsewhere. There are very few images that document use of the recreational facilities within the Park. Most

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photographs document its periphery, the edge between city and nature, and are void of spirited human activity. In a photograph by Mark Nadir, for example, the path that begins at the bottom left hand corner of the pictorial frame wraps around a grassy knoll where our vision is then cutoff making it difficult to discern where the Park ends and the city begins (Figure 1.13). At the last visible part of the path, figures rest on a bench, the trope exhibited in the photographs by Gottscho. The majority of the composition, however, illustrates not an interaction between human and landscape, but between cityscape and landscape.

This recurrent focus on the relationship between these two spaces speaks volumes about the concerns of New Yorkers during the period. By the end of the twenties, urbanists had transferred their attention from the construction of individual buildings to the development of comprehensive city planning schemes.64 One of the first manifestations of this fascination was Hugh Ferriss’ book, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*. In the heavily illustrated essay, Ferriss reviews the current state of existing cities, outlines popular trends in the architectural field, and finally makes a proposal for what he calls, “An Imaginary City.”65 Throughout the text he addresses common complaints about the modern city; lack of sunlight and air, pollution, and congestion, and laments the steps taken in attempts to resolve these issues. In Ferriss’ metropolis, towers are not the source of urban discontent but the solution. His dramatic drawings present a metropolis with widely spaced skyscrapers, broad avenues, and even rooftop gardens (Figure 1.14). Like

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the photographs examined in this chapter, however, he severely reduces the importance of the human figure to ant-like scale.

The ideas proposed by Ferriss and his contemporaries were incorporated into the largest urban planning project of the early twentieth century, The Regional Plan of New York and its Environ (RPNY). Spearheaded by Charles Dyer Norton and Frederic Delano and funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, the RPNY sought to identify problems in all aspects of city planning and work to improve their conditions in future developments. The RPNY committee published their findings and projections in an eight-volume survey and two-volume plan between 1928 and 1931. It was their hope that by “attempt[ing] to arrive at a philosophic conception of the future of New York” and using this study to educate the public on what constituted “well-building,” they would elevate the city to “the highest practicable degree of stability, balance, order and economy” and “opportunities [would] present themselves for securing dignity and beauty coincident with true economy.”66 In the second volume of the planning edition entitled Building the City, the committee criticized the tendency of New York urban planners to build in concentration. “As an American invention” they argue that the skyscraper “has proved to be an instrument of efficiency as well as noble in architecture. When, however, it is so crowded that it becomes part of a great mass of building that closes in and darkens streets, it is anti-American in spirit.”67 To avoid this problem, they repeatedly emphasized the need for open space surrounding tall buildings: “A building should have room to

breathe, and its occupants must have spacious places to look out upon” for “when…citizens come to understand that it is their right to enjoy light and air and space, as well as access to nature, we can have well proportioned growth.” 68 They also believed that in addition to health benefits, combining artificial structures with natural environments would have bilateral effects of beauty.

As the introductory image to their chapter “Beauty and Reality in Civic Art,” they used a photograph that has distinct similarities to other pictures taken from within the Park (Figure 1.15). Captioned, “The Hotel Center at Fifty-Ninth Street, Overlooking Central Park: A striking illustration of the value of space about buildings,” the photograph was used as a model of their proposed principals. Central Park was one of the only areas in the city that provided the type of vacant space the committee aspired to open up across the region and therefore served as an example of the advantages that such a plan offered if carried out in other locations.

Nadir, employed by the Federal Art Project (FAP) to photograph a series of city scenes, would not necessarily have read the RPNY or have been introduced to other projects with similar motives. 69 The concern for congestion however, was a ubiquitous topic and part of a cultural conversation that permeated all levels of society. While hired as visual artists, the FAP photographers were not solely interested in aesthetic pursuits; they also documented physical and social changes produced by the Depression. By photographing the emergent relationship between city and Park as part of his project,

68 Ibid., 2:112, 130.
69 “Federal Art Project.”
Nadir added this location to the canon of FAP photographs that comprise a narrative about the relevant concerns and interests of the public during the thirties. Just as the committee members of the RPNY hoped that “by plans, pictures, and ideas individual citizens may be inspired and provoked,” Nadir’s photograph aided in spreading this message and exalting the relationship between Central Park and Fifth Avenue as an exemplar of good city planning that should be replicated in future projects.

The relationship between city and Park presented by Nadir however is not solely a product of his perspective. In his reconstruction of Central Park, Moses consulted the ideas put forth by the RPNY. In their chapter on opportunities for rebuilding in Upper-Manhattan, the RPNY included a report written by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. about the problems presented by the emerging cityscape and increased street traffic. When speaking about the “preservation of a naturalistic treatment” of Central Park, Olmsted wrote:

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70 Adams, Lewis, and Orton, Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs: Building the City, 2:558.

71 While in the thirties the RPNY and Moses were praised for their progressive efforts, they were later criticized for serving affluent needs above working-class ones. In hindsight, critics argue that their projects worked primarily in the interest of raising land values and not on issues of equality such as securing affordable housing for all. See especially Robert Fitch, “Planning New York,” in The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 246–85; David A. Johnson, Planning the Great Metropolis: The 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1st ed, Studies in History, Planning, and the Environment 18 (London ; New York: E & FN Spon, 1996).
One of these two important depreciating influences...is the development of an extraordinarily conspicuous and extraordinarily irregular skyline of lofty buildings around the park, especially in its southerly portion but steadily expanding northward...One of the basic elements in the design of the park was to establish landscape conditions...of a sort that would enable them, with little imagination, to enjoy many of the refreshing sensations and emotions otherwise derivable only from pleasant, harmonious, and rather spacious natural landscapes in the country, markedly in contrast with urban conditions.\textsuperscript{72}

Advised by this Olmstedian dictum, Moses consciously safeguarded the edges of the Park as natural reserves. By doing this, he retained an aspect of the Park that most appealed to the upper class and therefore secured the continuation of their patronage. Finding ways to encourage wealthy denizens to continue to live within the city limits was an important dimension of city planning at the time. As the city reached a peak of industrial production, genteel residents were more and more dissuaded from remaining in what they perceived as a hub of filth and grim. They were beginning to migrate to their country homes for long periods of time with increasingly less interest in returning to the city.\textsuperscript{73} Even middle-class citizens were enticed by recently built suburban communities where it was cheaper to live and support a family than in the competitive and often dangerous urban realm. From an economic standpoint, this flight from the city undermined the municipal tax base and threatened the future of the metropolis. The influx of money into mercantile markets was imperative in sustaining a robust economy. Without it, planners and designers would be unable to provide the public infrastructure that continued a democratic society. As a result, planning skewed to the interests of wealthy residents.

\textsuperscript{72} Quoted in Adams, Lewis, and Orton, \textit{Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs: Building the City}, 2:428.

\textsuperscript{73} Cranz, \textit{The Politics of Park Design}, 184.
This was likely one of the reasons Moses placed most of the development in the inner portion of Central Park aside from the zoo and several children’s playgrounds. By doing this, Moses reinforced the Park’s division into two spaces, that designated for play and that designated for silent reflection amidst nature. In not developing the outer edges of the Park, Moses also preserved Olmsted’s sharp demarcation between space intended for work and space intended for leisure. Furthermore, the undisturbed marginal space acted like a barricade between the ordinary user of the Park and the specialized user of Fifth Avenue. A chart in the Regional Plan Survey shows that due to the elite residential development along the Park’s borders, especially on the east side, very few children lived in direct proximity (Figure 1.16). These numbers give insight into why Moses would have wanted to screen areas of high activity such as sports fields from the street. By disturbing the peacefulness of the avenue, play zones could have possibly decreased the value of adjoining property because of the raucous scene they allowed.

In the 1960’s one of Moses’ most scathing critics, Jane Jacobs, lambasted Moses for his decision to preserve the natural perimeter. It was her contention that by leaving the outermost parts of the Park undeveloped, Moses allowed the Park to function as a “border vacuum,” a space that sucked the vitality out of adjacent territory and represented “for most people, most of the time, barriers.”74 While she acknowledged the presence of some “intensive use” centers like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the zoo, and the model boat pond on the east side of the Park, she insisted that too much of the Park’s border was left

open and was, in effect, sterile. With low activity along the perimeter, the city and the Park were disconnected and fluid movement from one part of the city to another was damaged. To resolve this issue she wrote:

Park uses...should be brought right up to the borders of big parks, and designed as links between the park and its bordering street. They can belong to the world of the street and, on their other side, to the world of the park, and be charming in their double life. They should be calculated, not as rims shutting off a park (that would be terrible) but as spots of intense and magnetic border activity.  

For Jacobs, to and fro movement was the ideal goal of all city-planning initiatives. The more open and inviting the layout, the greater diversity the space would promote. Having diverse interaction in the Park enlivened the space, but also kept it safe and cultivated a strong sense of community among its users.

What Jacobs seems to have overlooked, however, was Moses’ intentions in reconstructing the Park. The very fabrication of what Jacobs called a border vacuum might have been what Moses intended. As a Parks Commissioner, he would have been aware of the relationship between the Fifth Avenue residents and the Park. By leaving the border primitive, Moses not only protected the purely naturalistic condition that the elite patrons preferred, but he also blocked the democratizing features from the view of wealthy residents along the Park’s edge. Fifth Avenue and the other bordering streets were not subject to the diversification for which Jacobs advocated and identified as a

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75 Ibid., 266.
76 Ibid., 259.
77 Moses was known to keep his plans secret until underway so people would not have the chance to protest their implementation. Caro, *The Power Broker*, 986.
marker of healthy urban space. For Fifth Avenue residents, the deadening of their space allowed them to retain their homogeneous utopia.

Moving to another location on the edge of the Park, I would like to further investigate how the Park’s borders prevent an integration of city and Park. In an image taken at the bird sanctuary (see Figure 1.8), two children stand with their backs to us as they gaze out over the lake (Figure 1.17). A straight and sturdy tree trunk grounds the left side of the composition. Its position directs our eyes to the trees across the lake. Our vision is led around the ring of trees across the center axis of the composition and reaches all the way to the right edge, the green abundance only cut off by the limits of the picture field. Stretching the horizontal length of the pictorial plane, the trees seem to sequester the children from the Fifth Avenue buildings. The buildings, as Olmsted Jr. predicted, “reduce the apparent scale and spaciousness of the broader landscapes in the park,”78 the very thing that distinguished the Park’s purpose. Their appearance, however, is not the type of “distracting,” “distressing,” and “ugly” sight that he detested. As in New York City Views, Grand Army Plaza Buildings (see Figure 1.2), the naturalistic features of the Park soften this vista. In Olmsted’s words:

where large areas of the facades of the surrounding buildings are seen from the park in positions where some nearby over-arching foliage masks the undersigned contortions of their combined silhouette, and the accentuation of its unhappy form by the sharp contrast of tone between the buildings and the sky, the mere fact of seeing these great urban facades as a near background of the park scenery does not take off from one’s enjoyment of its quasi-rural beauty in any degree remotely approaching the unpleasant effect of seeing the unmasked disorder of the skyline of buildings.79

78 Qt in Adams, Lewis, and Orton, Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs: Building the City, 2:428.

79 Qt in Ibid.
While a preservation of the naturalistic treatment of the Park honors Olmstedian credo, it visually and physically hinders cross-space movement between the Park and the city. The photograph offers a scene that suggests the potential for active engagement, either between the children or between the children and landscape, but that is not realized. The children appear motionless and minimally engaged with their environment, staring at what lies before them. What is more, the children do not interact with each other. This is particularly significant because the subjects are children. In the Park, we might expect to see children actively engaged, walking around their surroundings or interacting with each other. Instead, we witness a scene where even the children seem to be immersed in a pensive state of mind.

If we place it in comparison with areas of the Park that did facilitate higher levels of participation, the passivity of the children in the Wurts Brothers’ photograph becomes more apparent. A photograph taken at Heckscher Playground, for example, shows many children at play, climbing on the jungle gyms and engaged with one another (Figure 1.18). Heckscher Playground was built in 1926 in the area designated as a cricket ground in Olmsted and Vaux’s 1858 plan at the lower end of the Park. It was the only playground in Central Park until Moses made his interventions in the 1930s. This photograph serves as a good example of the increased number of people and heightened level of energy that playgrounds drew. It exhibits a scene that Fifth Avenue residents would have wanted to avoid if they were to enjoy a peaceful experience of the Park and maintain the integrity of their residential avenue.
A photograph taken a little farther north at the Naumburg Bandshell shows couples dancing (Figure 1.19). The Naumburg Bandshell is located on the interior of the Park to the east of the Mall (see Figure 1.8). Before Moses, it was an area that only hosted classical music concerts and prohibited dancing as it was considered too indecent for the public sphere of the Park. In the recreation era, however, dancing was thought to promote community involvement and interaction.

Another image taken at the skating pond on the border of the Park exhibits higher levels of engagement and integration of city and Park (Figure 1.20). Several figures appear on the bottom of the image, skating on the frozen pond and walking around its path. About three quarters up the composition, the prodigious buildings on Fifth Avenue abruptly terminate our lateral vision, again closing in the park patrons. Past them, we are only able to see the ill-defined sky above. While this image captures people engaged in recreational activity, the focus does not seem to be on them. Gottscho again captures a scene that establishes a dialectic between city and Park. It is a potent illustration of the collision between the horizontalism of civic space and the verticality of corporate ones. It shows the simultaneous achievement of the two main goals of urban planning that defined the era; the establishment of recreation space for the working class and the aggrandizement of capitalist power.

The meeting of these spaces created a fusion between two Victorian motifs, the sublime and the picturesque. Within the confines of the Park, the photograph presents a quaint vision of people relaxing through recreation. When we expand our view, however,

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the skyscrapers command our attention and the park-goers presence is drastically diminished. As a substitute for the natural wonders that traditionally evoked a sense of awe in the sublime, the magnificence of modern engineering instead inspires a sense of veneration. In his report for the RPNY, Olmsted Jr. refuted the notion that two landscapes such as these were incompatible. He claimed that,

the unhappily, ill-composed, distressing irregularity of the silhouette of competitive buildings around the park is even more painfully out of key with the vast orderly perfection of regularity, symmetry, and architectural repose…than it is with the somewhat flexible and adaptable picturesqueness of the “naturalistic” landscapes into which the designers of Central Park shaped its insuperably irregular natural topography.\textsuperscript{81}

This harmony is partially due to the architectural techniques used to construct the buildings on view. As a result of zoning regulations, the architects of these hotels made use of the setback style, which allowed for more sunlight and air to reach the streets, or in this case the Park, than if the structures were one continuous, unleveled tower. Projects by Ferriss, the RPNY, and others used setback architecture in their proposals as solutions to the problems that early skyscrapers presented. In addition to practical advantages, the stepped style of the hotels and their uneven silhouette mimic the irregular shapes and forms found in nature.

Despite the adaptation of the architecture to the landscape, Olmsted’s picturesque Park is disturbed and, in this moment, the city is victorious. The irrefutably domineering ascendance of the modern skyline disrupts the memory of the Park as it was in the nineteenth century. This transition is made evident by a photograph of people ice-skating in 1859 (Figure 1.21). In this photograph, the sensation of being in the city is not as

\textsuperscript{81} Qtd in Adams, Lewis, and Orton, \textit{Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs: Building the City}, 2:429.
perceptible. The subjects are not the buildings in the background, which are low in scale, but the ice skaters in the Park. In Gottscho’s image (see Figure 1.20), the verticality of the buildings demand that the Park attendees look up to them and acknowledge their sovereignty. They loom over the space of the Park and through their intrusion American technology is romanticized.

This type of visual organization recalls what Thomas Bender has defined as an attitude toward “The City of Ambition.” “The City of Ambition,” he wrote, “is nearly always viewed from the outside; it is hard to enter…”82 Bender pulls this title from a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz of the same name (Figure 1.22). In the 1910 photograph, Stieglitz pictures a ferry leaving the New York harbor; its steam echoed by the buildings in the urban landscape that anchors the background. The viewer is distanced from the hustle and bustle of the city, left outside its gates and looking in. By titling this photograph “The City of Ambition” and placing the viewer outside its boundaries, Stieglitz figures the city as something unfamiliar and impenetrable, yet also something to aspire towards. Bender continued, “Few visions of the City of Ambition include people; if they do, they are often dwarfed by huge structures representing the power of modern technology.”83 As Gottscho’s Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street (Figure 1.20), demonstrates, the edge of Central Park offers the occasion for such dehumanization.

Outside, distanced, and overpowered by the City of Ambition, the Park patrons reside in


83 Ibid., 84.
what Bender has dubbed “The City of Making-Do.” “Here” he wrote, “the aim is to prevail rather than triumph.” This binary construction reinforces Central Park as a democratic space of the people and Fifth Avenue as the unattainable dream.

This contention is supported in Arthur Vitols’ *Hotels, Savoy-Plaza Hotel, Fifth Avenue and 59th Street*, in which the glorification of the City of Ambition is amplified through the magnification of buildings and removal of human figures (Figure 1.23). In this photograph, the Fifth Avenue hotels are given a central position as they tower over the Park. With vegetation taking up the bottom quarter of the composition, the viewer is not provided with any visual pathway or entrance into the buildings. The prominent repetition of this hotel grouping at 59th Street obliges the viewer to consider its implications. As hotels that catered to the rich and powerful, the ensemble of Fifth Avenue buildings represented the glories of modern capitalism. The persistence with which they are pictured from Central Park indicates an intense fascination with them on the part of the public. This admiration however, was experienced from afar; not everyone is granted access. Vitols’ photograph reinforces this exclusion through the use of nature as a barrier. Indeed, the viewer is forced to remain in the City of Making-Do.

From these images, I infer that even when the Park is framed as a populist space and the aura of romantic nostalgia is suppressed, the relationship between the urban and

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84 Ibid., 81.

85 The Byron Company was founded by father and son team, Joseph and Percy Byron, in 1892 and stayed in business until 1942 when it closed because of WWII. The commercial studio established their legacy not only through photographing the lives of New York’s high society, but also through documenting the Lower East Side tenements and many of the city’s landmarks, such as the original Times building, in various stages of construction. They specialized in stage and ship photography from which they received most of their commissions. See, Simmons, *Gotham Comes of Age*; Mayer, *Once upon a City.*
pastoral is still ambivalent. While they do not suppress the prominence of the architectural models, the photographs evince the inaccessibility of the prestigious Fifth Avenue hotels for the average person and reinforce the natural landscape’s rejection of the city’s overall integration into the Park. The ambivalence toward the cityscape exemplified in all of the images in this chapter resonate with sentiments expressed by Lewis Mumford in his Depression-era “Sky Lines” column for *The New Yorker.* In his provocative columns, which tackle a wide range of topics, Mumford describes the skyline with both horror and awe. From one column to the next, he scrutinized New York’s most prominent architectural and infrastructural projects, approaching each with varied attitudes and offering his theories of sustainable urban growth. In one issue from 1932, Mumford addresses the uptown apartment homes surrounding the Park with a dubious attitude:

but will our half-baked “modern” apartment houses that are now springing up along the Park look half as real and convincing fifty years from now? I will answer that question. Absolutely not! The “modernism” of these buildings is merely a thin veneer…The most hopeful feature about a great many of the new apartment houses is the increasing breadth of the windows. The fear of sunlight and air, which we quaintly think confined to the French, is beginning to disappear among the well-to-do, who have so often been content with dark, back-to-back houses and apartments which differed only in price, space, and internal cleanliness from our worst slums.

Mumford’s statement sheds light on a crucial point about the apartment homes skirting Central Park. While they may on immediate impression appear striking, their splendor is short-lived. Their real virtue is found in the experience they offer from within. The


87 Ibid., 74.
apartment homes, in short, are truly only laudable for how they transform the interior, and not how they appear from an outsider’s perspective. Considered to be a voice of his generation, Mumford’s inconsistent and ambivalent comments about the impact of modern architecture have a resounding influence on contemporary audiences’ understanding of the period.
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Figure 1.23. Arthur Vitols, Byron Company, *Hotels, Savoy-Plaza Hotel, Fifth Avenue and 59th Street*, 1937, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10, Museum of the City of New York.
Chapter II: The Space Without

The apartment hotel and the apartment building emerged in the early twentieth century as desirable residences for wealthy New Yorkers. Aside from the luxurious amenities they offered, high-rise homes were significant because they enabled citizens the opportunity to live in the sky. Elevated well above the masses, the residents of modern apartment homes obtained an optical advantage that provided them with new forms of power and knowledge, as well as restored lost privilege over the Park. Photographs taken from within the homes of Fifth Avenue reveal and solidify the exclusivity of the elevated view by promoting their exceptional qualities and capacity to re-work visual conceptions of the metropolis. They embody an understanding of New York as a place in which the urban and the natural, the public and the private, can co-exist and cooperate.

Perched above it all, the photographs from these homes represent the secure hold that Fifth Avenue residents had on their place in the social hierarchy and confirm their enviable position for all who reside below. It is as American novelist Theodore Dreiser mused in *The Color of a Great City*:

I think of all the powerful or semi-powerful men and women throughout the world, toiling at one task or another—a store, a mine, a bank, a profession—somewhere outside of New York, whose one ambition is to reach the place where their wealth will permit them to enter and remain in New York, dominant above the masses, luxuriating in what they consider luxury.\(^8^8\)

Fifth Avenue’s reputation as the premier street of Manhattan is not solely a result of modern cosmopolitan development, but was determined in the early stages of the city’s

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incubation. Making its first appearance in the Commissioner’s Plan of 1811, Fifth Avenue was always imagined as the grand boulevard of the nation’s most prestigious city. For the first few decades of its existence, Fifth Avenue remained a rural country road and the area above 59th street was virtually vacant. By the end of the century, the avenue extended north and was home to many of the city’s social elite, the portion running along Central Park adopting the epithet, “Millionaire’s Row” (Figure 2.1). At this time there were around one hundred private residences lining the thirty-seven-block span of the avenue from 59th to 96th street, with many lots left undeveloped. Such a low number does not indicate undesirability but rather exclusivity. Families like the Astors, Vanderbils, Carniges, and Fricks left an indelible mark on the street’s character and established the renown it enjoys today.

By contrast with the palatial mansions of the nineteenth century, which required a great deal of maintenance, luxury apartments of the 1930s came equipped with an assortment of services such as cleaning and cooking staffs. The Fifth Avenue Hotel, opened in 1859 between 23rd and 24th Streets, was the first model to set the standard for this modern style of living. Residents received all the comforts of a mansion without the burden of managing a house, its grounds, and a staff. By the end of the century, other developers followed suit and built hotels on Fifth Avenue. In 1893 the Waldorf (later the

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Waldorf-Astoria) opened its doors, succeeded by the Plaza in 1900 and the St. Regis in 1904.

Apartment homes and hotels were not only valued for their convenience but were necessitated by economical pressures on the neighborhood. By eliminating 843 acres of land from future development, the Park planners automatically inflated the worth of adjacent land in the uptown real estate market.\(^91\) Predicting its remunerative potential before and during construction, wealthy businessmen bought land in anticipation of its future payoff. But the reduction of acreage also had another consequence that encouraged well-off citizens to purchase plots. With less land available, the property surrounding Central Park ran the risk of hosting developments that would place as many buildings into one area as possible thereby making way for crowded and unhealthy living conditions.\(^92\) If wealthy merchants, bankers, and businessmen owned all of the abutting property to Central Park, they could ensure that uptown did not come to resemble the congested downtown. Moreover, well aware that impoverished citizens were unable to afford housing in the area, the wealthy men and women of uptown saw the Park as a method to halt the spread of low-income populations.\(^93\)

As speculative real estate and businessmen had foreseen, the cost of property surrounding the Park escalated steadily each year after Central Park opened.\(^94\) In a real estate record issued in 1874, the cost of lots from 71st to 74th Street on Fifth Avenue is

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\(^91\) Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 88.

\(^92\) Ibid., 55.


\(^94\) Patterson, *Fifth Avenue*, 214.
documented as “An Instance in Great Real Increase in Values” (Figure 2.2). On the bottom left hand corner of the lithograph, figures show that between 1818 and 1864, the properties rose in value from $2.23 to $5.75 per lot, approximately a 150 percent increase. In the ten-year span from 1864-1874, a little less than fifteen years after the Park opened, the same lots were valued at $30 each, a 440 percent increase. Such a steep growth in value can only be explained by the creation of Central Park. Fifth Avenue can therefore be understood as one of the first examples of how proximity to a bucolic landscape can raise property price. For city planners concerned with real estate value, a document such as this one justified the need for more open spaces in the city if they wanted to continue to increase the value of land. In 1928 the Regional Survey of New York cited Central Park as a viable model for “establishing a certain quality of residence and a level of property values on the land that surrounded it.”95 Of the streets on the four sides of the Park, fashionable Fifth Avenue commands the highest prices, often generating a premium excessive of one hundred percent compared to real estate to the West of the Park.96

These high prices satisfied wealthy urbanites because they kept the lower classes from occupying the coveted areas around the Park but they were also a source of discontent because prices became so high that many of them could not afford to live there.


96 Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar report that residences in the area between 62nd and 74th on the West side of the park drew in less than half of its eastern counterpart. By 1940, the rent on Fifth Avenue from 63rd to 77th cost seven times more than rent on Fifth Avenue above the park. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, The Park and the People, 404.
themselves. Luxury apartment buildings were a solution to this dilemma; developers could continue to command profit while maintaining the neighborhood for the upper class. During the 1920s, mansions were razed one after another. The 1927 demolition of the Cornelius Vanderbilt II mansion, the largest home ever built in Manhattan, officially signaled a close to the glamorous Gilded Age.  

One year later, the Savoy-Plaza and Sherry-Netherland Hotels were erected between 58th and 59th Street and 59th and 60th Street respectively. By 1930 the Pierre joined this string of hotels, settling into the block front between 60th and 61st Street. Together, with the Plaza, these four hotels monopolized the southeastern corner of Central Park.

With elevated buildings came new visual experiences. From on high, the Park’s relationship to both the domestic sphere and to the built environment was radically transformed. In the thirties and forties the Wurts Brothers firm showed these unprecedented views in photographs taken from apartment windows. In one of their earliest elevated views of Central Park from 1931 their photographer was positioned at the ledge of a window that looked west, across Central Park towards the twin towers of the Eldorado apartment building (Figure 2.3). In the foreground a vase of fully bloomed flowers stands, their dark silhouette accentuated by the lighter tones of the middle ground. To either side of the window curtains are neatly drawn back, framing the view. Beyond the room’s interior, our vision enters the space of the Park, crossing what seems

97 Ibid., 377.

98 The metal gates once marking the entrance to this home were donated to the Central Park Conservatory Gardens at 104th Street and Fifth Avenue where they stand today.

99 At the time of its opening, the Sherry-Netherland was the tallest apartment hotel in the city.
to be a walking trail and a thicket of trees. From there extends a still body of water, terminating in a multi-leveled yet orderly cityscape that acts as a formal horizon line for the entire composition. In the foreground, the bottom edge of the open window cuts off our upward vision and forces our line of sight to remain in the middle ground filled by the Park and cityscape. The effect is the creation of a smaller picture, defined by the stark edges of the outermost ledge, the bottom of the window and the curtains to either side, within the larger picture frame. These boundaries compress the view so that the terrain of Park and city are melded into a picture of one continuous landscape.

From this location, the apartment resident, and we as viewers, is afforded a privileged experience. Unlike visions within the Park, in which the viewer is enveloped by the immediacy and immensity of the natural growth and towering skyscrapers, the spectator in the apartment has a deeper range of vision. The literal distance of the elevated apartment separated its inhabitants from the mass of people that frequented the Park and sheltered them from the noise and pollution created by the increased activity. In this way, the window allowed residents to take pleasure in the best aspects of the Park without having to cope with the irritations that were endemic to the urban city.

The notion of the interior as a place offering shelter from undesirable outside forces has a long history. Social historian Richard Sennett traces its origins to the Christian culture of the Old Testament from the time of Augustine.100 During this period, the church was a spiritual center that protected devotees from the profanity of secular life.

It was a protective device based on a culture of fear that was motivated by a quest for spiritual enlightenment and a faith in god. By the nineteenth century and the advent of industrial life, he argues, the motivation turned from spiritual to psychological. The sacred place of refuge moved from the church to the personal abode. Though the home acted as a place of moral refuge, Sennett suggests that modern culture expected too much from its search for a secular sanctuary and that the consequences of making the home a sacred place resulted in “an increase in isolation and in inequality… Here the bourgeoisie [is] triumphant.”\textsuperscript{101} Whereas Christian churches offered refuge to all, the modern definition of sanctuary was predicated on notions of exclusivity:

The sanctuary of the Christian city has been reduced to a sense of comfort in well-designed places where other people do not intrude. Safe because empty; safe because clearly marked. Authority is divorced from community: this is the conundrum of sanctuary as it has evolved in the city.\textsuperscript{102}

Separation in modernity originated in a fear of ambiguity or an inability to identify or define. As Central Park became more heterogeneous, it became increasingly difficult for the elite class to understand and exert control over it. Ensnconced in their Fifth Avenue homes, urbanites took solace in a set of defined parameters.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, 37.
Zoning Out Diversity

By the Depression Central Park was no longer a safe haven from the commotion of city life but instead an extension of it. One can imagine that the stream of new users flowing into the Park made its walkways resemble an urban street. At the turn of the century Georg Simmel wrote about the detrimental effects the city had on the individual, opening his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” with the words,

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life.

He explained that people are overwhelmed by sensory and psychological stimuli that force them to adopt a protective attitude so as not to be “leveled down and worn out by a social technological mechanism.” Above the Park, Fifth Avenue residents were not only protected from the overstimulation that Simmel outlined but were also given an easy way to retain their individuality that was at risk in the monotony of urban street life.

Around the same time that Simmel was forming his ideas, commercial businesses were following residences uptown, settling into buildings below 59th Street that once belonged to the first families of Fifth Avenue. For the most part, businesses only offered their services to the wealthy elite but there were no land use regulations at the time, allowing factories that contaminated the pristine homogeneity of the avenue to move in.

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103 Park management was under constant pressure to mitigate the litter, vandalism, and homeless squatters within the park. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 430.


105 Ibid.
Once disturbed only by the sound of their carriages, Fifth Avenue residents were now confronted with the sights, sounds, and smells of the world of immigrant labor. Threatened by the newly diversified neighborhood, worried residents organized to protect their treasured avenue.

The first manifestation of these concerns occurred in 1903 with the formation of the New York City Improvement Commission. Their mission was to beautify the area that had been afflicted by industrialization. One of their first suggestions was widening Fifth Avenue so that it could accommodate the crowds of people window shopping and commuting. A few years later the congestion, noise, and pollution generated by the concentration of factories had risen to the point where those living on the street were compelled to make private investments to keep Fifth Avenue immune from the hazards of the burgeoning plural society. In some cases, families were reported to buy adjacent land to their own plots to prevent the encroachment of unfavorable neighbors. In 1907, the residents of Fifth Avenue took measures that effected the physical and social development of the area for the next two decades.

Inspired by Daniel Burnham’s City Beautiful movement, residents created the Fifth Avenue Association. Consistent with contemporaneous desires for civic betterment, advocates of the City Beautiful movement believed the beautification of their city could improve the quality of life for all. To do this, they insisted that regulations for urban

106 Johnson, Planning the Great Metropolis, 31.
107 Patterson, Fifth Avenue, 185.
108 For discussions on the moralizing effects of the City Beautiful Movement, see Paul S Boyer, Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978),
design be established to combat problems of the modern city. Having lost the stretch of Fifth Avenue south of 59th street to commercial development, they focused their energies on the portion of the avenue that remained residential, parallel to the Park. Through their efforts, they managed to implement a height limit of 125 feet on buildings north of 59th street. This successfully restricted the construction of manufacturing lofts and in turn impeded the infiltration of working-class populations into their space. But this was not enough to assuage their worries about the future real estate market. After years of lobbying for tighter restrictions, the Borough President, George McAneny assembled the Fifth Avenue Commission in 1911, an offshoot of the Association that included many of its original members. When this organization proved unsuccessful, they formed the Committee on City Planning. Even with the formation of this organization, Fifth Avenue residents faced great resistance obtaining political backing for their propositions until 1916 when the Commission metamorphosed yet again and in a final attempt to preserve their elite enclave, assembled a group with the sanctimonious moniker of Save New York Committee. Using the suggestions of the Heights of Buildings Commission, the Committee passed the nation’s first effective ordinance on land use, the 1916 Zoning

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109 Fifth Avenue was seen as an example of larger problems of citywide development. Not only were city planners concerned with the character of people inhabiting the surrounding area, but also on a pragmatic level, were deeply concerned with the physical effects of tall buildings on the nearby area such as the loss of light and airflow. Johnson, *Planning the Great Metropolis*, 39.
Resolution.\textsuperscript{110} With this, buildings on Fifth Avenue (and the rest of the city) were limited in their height, width, and purpose of use.

Behind the sententious cloak of these movements lay pecuniary reasons for the citizens’ vehement dedication to the establishment of urban planning codes—a desire to stabilize and increase the value of their property by controlling the production of goods and the growth of capital.\textsuperscript{111} As land use determines land value, garment factories adjacent to upscale retail business and private homes depreciated the market price of the latter. In prohibiting industrial uses, Fifth Avenue residents retained the authority to shape the character of their neighborhood as well as maintain the value of their property. In addition to use, land values and rent prices are also dictated by the physical location of the land itself, open spaces being a factor that increases value.\textsuperscript{112} Extending the length of Central Park, it is therefore understandable why Fifth Avenue commands such high values. For this reason many of the citizens who first campaigned for the creation of a park were uptown real estate investors. Construction of the Park where it stands today allowed real estate entrepreneurs to charge higher rent prices on the basis of enhancements that were partially paid by government taxes.

Furthermore, because Central Park was under municipal purview, the surrounding residents did not have to spend their own time and money to maintain it as they would


\textsuperscript{111} Fitch, “Planning New York,” 257.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 266–7.
with personally owned land. This situation marks a sharp divergence from earlier social systems of landed gentry. Before the industrial age, prestige was appointed to citizens according to the amount of land they owned. On Central Park and Fifth Avenue in the twentieth century, cachet was not dependent on private ownership but on the view one had of public land. Power was disengaged from ownership and visibility became the chief facilitator of status. Typically, a view overlooking public space would be cause for concern because of potential “instability, change, and environmental decay.” 113 As government maintained land, public parks could be modified at any time without consultation or permission from nearby residents. Views of the landscape might be impeded and as a consequence, a residence could become less desirable. Central Park, however, was a protected landmark of the city and therefore impervious to drastic mutations or transitions in the market. No offensively ugly or bulky structure would ever impinge on the beauty of the green space. The Park’s durability combined with the 1916 Zoning Resolution ensured that the property fronting Fifth Avenue apartments was stabilized, reassuring residents that they could have confidence in a consistently pleasurable and powerful outlook.

This is what made the boundary between Central Park and Fifth Avenue so unique. In the 1930s there were many other photographers shooting the city from elevated heights. Alfred Stieglitz, for example, captured several photographs from the windows of his last studio, An American Place (Figure 2.4). As an artist that worked most of his career in the pictorialist tradition, Stieglitz’s presentation of the abstract forms

of skyscrapers outside his window invoked questions about how the art he created in his studio would fit into the changing conceptions of art in the ever-modernizing city. In contrast, residents whose view overlooked Central Park did not have to worry that a changing landscape would strike discord with their accustomed ways of living and expectations for privileged experiences. From their rarified positions, they had the power to mold the landscape into the framework of their worldview.

Panoptic Power

1107 Fifth Avenue, Interior, View from Apartment Window Looking West Across Central Park by the Wurts Brothers studio, (see Figure 2.3) demonstrates a type of visual power unavailable before the age of multi-story buildings. From within the apartment, we as spectators are granted the ability to see without being seen. In other words, viewers can look down on Central Park and its visitors without being seen themselves. This idea is derived from Michel Foucault’s writings on the prison system in which he describes the program of the “Panopticon,” a privileged place of hierarchal observation that inscribes a set of power relations between the seer and the seen. In the Panopticon, Foucault argues that power is afforded to those who gaze from above because they have the ability to compare and categorize those below without their knowledge. This kind of invisible judgment causes the people who are looked down upon to be mindful of their conduct. In this way, the watcher exerts control over the watched.

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In the mansions or townhomes of the nineteenth century, curtains were an essential feature of interior décor, particularly for residences that faced the street.\textsuperscript{116} Without them, residents had little privacy as passerbys could look through the window and see the life inside the home. Windows without curtains blurred the delineation between the private realm of the home and the public realm of the street in a way that was uncomfortable for the elite families of Fifth Avenue. Having a view of the street was not as much a privilege as it was an invasion. Curtains therefore usually stayed shut and windows actually had little purpose. This detail about the uses of interior design reveals the nature of the nineteenth-century home as a strictly private place, unassimilable to life outside of its walls.

As \textit{1107 Fifth Avenue, Interior} instantiates, the vertical rise of the apartment home enabled the full function of the window as a conduit for exercising the power of sight. The distinction between watching and being watched is particularly important for the spaces of Central Park and Fifth Avenue because it indicates a transition in the status of visibility. Previously, status was accrued by individuals when they were seen parading down Fifth Avenue or along the promenades of Central Park. Similarly to the Central Park Mall, Fifth Avenue was a semi-public stage on which residents displayed their wealth and pedigree. Well into the twentieth century it was common practice for families to step out of their front doors in their Sunday best and parade up and down the avenue, proving their worth as they socialized with other wealthy residents (Figure 2.5).\textsuperscript{117} The

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\textsuperscript{116} Patterson, \textit{Fifth Avenue}, 169.
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\textsuperscript{117} Cigliano, Landau, and Octagon (Washington), \textit{The Grand American Avenue, 1850-1920}, 22.
\end{flushright}
occasion of being seen mingling with the people of high society marked the wealthy class as bearers of privilege.

On other days of the week, the grandeur and opulence of their European-inspired homes exhibited their elite status. Ranging from Federal and Greek revival houses to Renaissance palazzo brownstones to the neo-classicism of the Beaux-Arts style from France, the residences along Fifth Avenue formed a timeline of European architecture. The magnificence of these homes not only served to boost the status of their inhabitants, but also acted as a showcase for architects. Among them American born architect Richard Morris Hunt received the most patronage, eventually designing the façade and Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art located at Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street. Hunt’s acclaim as an architect was bolstered by his Fifth Avenue commissions and eventually, owning a home designed by Hunt afforded residents greater esteem within their community.

By the third decade of the twentieth century when the culture of leisure had been commodified and made accessible to the masses, the spectacle of going to Central Park or walking Fifth Avenue was not the decadent display it had once been but was targeted for mass commercialization. In response, upper-middle-class society needed to find new methods to exert their privilege and separation from the masses, which was provided by the elevated view from their Fifth Avenue apartments. Foucault argues that the panoptic position “is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance” and “the more one possesses power or privilege,” (which was provided by the elevated gaze), “the more one is marked as an
For Foucault, the ability to examine from above replaced ritualized processions as a means to assert one’s individuality. It achieved this power by homogenizing everyone seen below into the “norm” and highlighting how the person above differed in contrast. He notes that this deviates from previous patterns of establishing status in which people claimed power on the basis of ancestral lineage. In modernity, individuality was acquired through markers of difference, not an inheritance of traditions or bloodline. For elite urbanites this meant that power no longer existed in how one was seen, (as it was in the nineteenth century), but in what one could see. Residents of Fifth Avenue apartments were offered the rare privilege of surveying the people below and could therefore distinguish themselves as powerful individuals.

Although apartment windows certainly diminished the divide between outside and inside, the window featured in the Wurts Brothers’ photograph, maintains some sense of separation due to its muntins, the strips between the panes of glass. As art historian Sandy Isenstadt has documented, muntins were sometimes criticized by figures such as landscape designer Humphry Repton and architect Henry Hudson Holly for interrupting the view of the landscape outside, but many others such as architect Russell Sturgis, interior decorator Ruby Ross Goodnow, and critic Mary Fanton Roberts praised them for both practical and aesthetic reasons. As early as 1897 American novelist Edith Wharton and architect and interior designer Ogden Codman, Jr. advocated for muntins

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119 Ibid., 193.

writing that they “serve to establish a relation between the inside of the house and the landscape, making the latter what, as seen from a room, it logically ought to be: a part of the wall-decoration, in the sense of being subordinated to the same general lines.”\textsuperscript{121} For Wharton and Codman, the muntined window could bring the outside view into the structure of the home like a mural painted on the wall. By obstructing and partitioning a view of the Park, muntins re-inscribed the view as a decorative element of the home. It could be argued then, that muntins domesticated the typically public experience of Central Park. In this way, muntins functioned to maintain the characterization of the home as an enclosed space, withdrawn and separate from external society.

The photographer of 1107 Fifth Avenue, Interior reinforces the separation between inside and out by placing the table against the window so that the viewer is distanced from its ledge. This stresses the sensation of interiority, of being \textit{in here} and not \textit{out there}. The flower vase on the table furthers this sense of domesticity and assists in defining the character of the Fifth Avenue home. In contrast to the Park where the city controlled the space, the flowers in the vase were under the control of the inhabitant, and therefore act as a sign of authoritative proprietorship. In the mid-twentieth century, Roland Barthes took up the elevated position from the heights of the Eiffel Tower declaring that, “one can dream there, eat there, observe there, understand there, marvel there…one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of a world.” The vase serves to emphasize this duality of perception, signaling a connection with and a separation from the outside. Residents could go about their daily business in the privacy

\textsuperscript{121} Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, \textit{The Decoration of Houses}, Leisure Class in America (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 67.
of their homes while taking delight in the pleasures of Central Park. This entitlement is significant because the Park went from acting as a refuge for upper-class urbanites to serving the entire metropolis. The view from the apartment restored the privileged experience of the Park to the uptown elite and essentially privatized the public domain for their personal consumption.

In addition to the effects of elevated vision on the interior space of the home, it also allowed residents to visualize the landscape from a new perspective. *View Across [Central] Park at Fifth Avenue and 79<sup>th</sup> Street*, a photograph taken by Samuel Gottscho, shows how, in opposition to views from within the Park, the view from on high fuses the urban and natural landscapes (Figure 2.6). Liberated from the frame of the window, the viewer’s eyes are led through the Park by the winding pathways that appear to seamlessly flow from the street into the Park and out the western side where they are met by a line of residential buildings. Eliminating an architectural framework from the composition removes the sense of interiority that is integral to the Wurts Brothers’ photographs and thus establishes a stronger relationship between the viewer and the landscape below. Without the window frame to situate the viewer’s position the comforting sensation of being shut indoors is lost. Rather than being reminded of the interior location, the viewer is thrust into a direct relation with the metropolis. The view is less about the pleasures of experiencing the Park in a domestic setting and more about an unfettered visual experience of the Park. Pushed beyond the frame, the boundaries of private and public space are transcended as the viewer participates in the public realm from a private position.
Gottscho’s image prefigures mid-century desires for an unmediated relationship between the resident and the outdoors exemplified by the plate-glass picture window. These fantasies were first realized on a large scale in the thirties due to the advancement of glass technology.\textsuperscript{122} According to Isenstadt, by the 1930s, homeowners desired spacious homes.\textsuperscript{123} In New York, this sensation was especially difficult to achieve because concentrated development limited the potential size of a build. Windows offered a way to circumvent the lack of space by offering visual expansion, but until the turn of the century glass technology was unrefined making the quantity of its production “scarce and poor in quality.”\textsuperscript{124} By the 1930s significant technological progress had improved the quality of glass and therefore increased its output, turning it into what Isenstadt called, “the miracle material of the Depression.”\textsuperscript{125}

Throughout the decade glass was a centerpiece of architectural thought and practice. Several leading architects experimented with its potential applications, most notably Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his use of glass to generate unobstructed visual connections between interior and exterior spaces. Mies’ work proved that glass had the ability to enlarge a home without actually extending its square footage and that architecture was not limited to its material boundaries. With the simple installation of a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Isenstadt, \textit{The Modern American House}, 205.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 110.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 225.
\end{itemize}
window, an architect could provide the illusion of spatial extension even where it did not exist.\footnote{126 Isenstadt, \textit{The Modern American House}, 111.}

Isenstadt adds that the picture window transformed things that traditionally were not considered a part of “wilderness” into constitutive elements of the landscape.\footnote{127 Sandy Isenstadt, “The Rise and Fall of the Picture Window,” in \textit{Housing and Dwelling: Perspectives on Modern Domestic Architecture} (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2007), 303.} In \textit{View Across [Central] Park at Fifth Avenue and 79th Street}, the line of buildings in the top third of the composition appears as a dense concrete forest. The city is naturalized as an extension of the Park. For the occupants of Fifth Avenue, this meant that Central Park was a continuance of their neighborhood and more specifically the home they inhabited. The Park’s reputation as the backyard of the rich and powerful is thus reaffirmed through such images.

Throughout the Depression, numerous popular magazines and home journals used the tableau of the unimpeded residential vista to market an idealized domestic lifestyle to the middle class.\footnote{128 Publications such as \textit{House Beautiful}, \textit{House and Garden}, \textit{Ladies’ Home Journal}, and \textit{Better Homes and Gardens} promoted the pastoral vista as characteristic of modern living.} In his book \textit{Advertising the American Dream}, Roland Marchand posits that photographic images “enhance[d] the exclusiveness and desirability of the life of the rich, and...suggest[ed] how easily the advertised product would eliminate barriers to upward mobility.”\footnote{129 Roland Marchand, \textit{Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 195.} Through its proliferation, the photograph not only shaped popular fantasies but also functioned as evidence that social aspirations were in fact attainable.
Photographs taken from Fifth Avenue apartments established a model for what modern success looked like, to which the lower classes hoped to someday achieve.

A liberated relationship between viewers and viewed made possible the ability to visually navigate the landscape by following one path to the next and mapping out potential directions of movement. In his essay “The Practice of Everyday Life” Michel de Certeau discussed this sort of intelligible view and argued that heightened positions “transfigures him [the viewer] into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god.” In comparison to views from inside the Park where the pedestrian is unable to plan a route, this view renders the landscape legible and available for visual exploration. This type of visual consciousness is, however, only afforded to those with economic advantage. On the ground, the realm of the masses, the city and the pastoral overwhelm the human figure in the enormity of steel structures or of bountiful vegetation, impeding any depth of field and thus keeping the viewer from obtaining a comprehensive overview.

While uptown denizens gained many benefits from their privileged position, they also forewent certain experiences. Isenstadt points out that window views were often criticized as an excuse to “[substitute] stationary views for physical movement through nature. Views from windows were fixed and so lacked the picturesque variety and

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in this respect the function of Central Park was dramatically altered by the view from above. Like all parks, Central Park was designed for occupation, not distanced observation. Mental repose was attained through the physical act of roaming the grounds. Traveling from the Mall to the terraces to the ramble soothed the psyche by offering variegated views and multi-sensorial experiences. From the heights of an apartment on Fifth Avenue, relaxation was transformed from “tak[ing] place in a landscape” to being “visualized as a landscape.” Central Park’s value was reduced to the purely visual. Moreover, the fact that residents drew their enjoyment from the Park without physically entering the space reinforced their status as the leisure class. The apartment home overlooking Central Park expanded leisure’s definition to include not only time spent on amusements, as Thorstein Veblen understood it, but also the ability to have a sedentary experience of the world. Leisure was redefined through the elevated view as a cognitive exercise that did not require one to leave the home, or even the couch.

Central Park attained a particularly alluring effect when the sun went down. Before the skyscraper, the nighttime sky was a vast expanse of darkness; but with its rise the sky was set alight. Electric lighting not only extended the life of the city, but also revolutionized perceptions of the Park as an exclusively natural environment. In Night Skyline, Central Park Lake, the sylvan landscape of the Park is electrified by the artificial illumination of the skyline and lampposts (Figure 2.7). The Park is modernized by the

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131 Isenstadt, The Modern American House, 144.

dazzling wonders of modern science. Technology and nature are forced to converge, making the elevated view a site of transcendence and imbuing the nocturne with new potentialities.

Higher vantage points also reconfigured the landscape below by re-establishing a horizontal field of vision. Instead of using a portrait format, photographers often chose prospects that drew attention to the horizontal geography of the landscape (Figure 2.8). In the early twentieth century when the organization of space was less conceived in horizontal terms than the vertical, the amount of ground space on a lot became less consequential than the height of a potential building on it. Due to escalating land values, it was more cost efficient for developers to build up than to build out. Thus, in a city under perpetual vertical development, Central Park remained the last enduring expanse of horizontal New York. In *Central Park, View from Roof of Pierre Looking West over Park at Century and Majestic Apartments* (Figure 2.8), two elements stress the horizontal structure of the landscape. The first is the road that begins in the foreground of the composition and stretches to the middle where it is met by the promenade that terminates at the Bethesda Terraces. The second is the row of buildings in the background on Central Park West. Its diagonal trajectory serves to elongate the landscape in a way that a completely frontal view does not. Each building appearing smaller as it recedes into the background, the distance from where the viewer is positioned to the opposite corner is visually extended. In accentuating the length of Central Park, these linear devices draw attention to the Park’s uniqueness as a horizontal plane amidst a landscape of vertical structures.
Considering the horizontal and vertical proportions of the landscape, Thomas Bender and William Taylor’s concepts of “civic horizontalism” and “corporate verticality” are useful to investigate the ideological implications through which the built environment is interpreted. For Bender and Taylor, “New York horizontal monumentalism implies civic or public purposes, while the tower represents the power of corporate capitalism.” While businessmen and the social elite found their modern identity in the heights of architectural individualism, average people related to the city through a sense of collectivity and public unity. The latter impulse intersects with Depression-era ideals of Progressivism, in which the government was central to coordinating a cooperative and unified public landscape. Parks in general, but especially Central Park, were physical demonstrations of these ideals with their accessible open spaces, recreational facilities, and civic architecture. What is more, Central Park interrupted the methodical grid pattern that compartmentalized the city according to class divisions. Looking down on the swaths of green pastures and winding pathways, there is no evidence of the highly delineated grid that organized Manhattan.

In Gottscho’s and the Wurts Brothers’ photographs, we are not presented with a dichotomy of city or Park, but rather an acceptance of both. From their positions on high,

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134 Ibid., 190.

135 “The grid was particularly congenial to the republican concept of knowledge, for it was thought to facilitate the separation and classification…that Americans then valued in every aspect of human activity. New York’s grided spaces satisfied the republican love of a kind of order that could be laid out in a simple, quickly and easily grasped scheme.” Catherine Hoover Voorsanger, John K. Howat, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), eds., Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825-1861 (New York : New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2000), 12.
the photographers effectively captured the dualism characteristic of interwar urban discourse, a dualism that was synthesized only through the elevated view. The view from above reinforced individuality, but it also allowed the observer to reflect on ideals of unity represented by the Park. Two ideas, that of individualism and that of collectivity, usually in tension with one other, are combined to create the idealized privileged view. Residents of apartments could subscribe to the unifying rhetoric of the New Deal while retaining their separation and privacy. Scholars Angela Blake and Douglas Tallack have explained that, “Distance can protect by creating an ‘ideal space,’ and by hiding the local detail.”136 Estranged from the realities of everyday life, Fifth Avenue residents had the privilege of ignoring the ramifications of economic crisis and could accede to the idealized messages espoused by governmental officials intended to draw the country into a unified front. As Certeau wrote in 1984: “It’s hard to be down when you’re up.”137 For those fortunate enough to claim an address on Fifth Avenue above 59th Street, it was possible to create the idealized utopia that urban visionaries dreamed to come true. As a result, a gap was created between the city imagined through the privileged gaze and the city as it was actually experienced on the ground.

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Figure 2.1. Raphel Tuck & Sons, Millionaires Row, c. 1905, postcard, 3 ½ x 5 ½ in., Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 2.2. Valuable Real Estate Record, an Instance of Great Real Increase of Values in Property on Manhattan Island, 1874, lithograph, 23 ¾ x 19 ¾ in., Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 2.3. Wurts Brothers, *1107 Fifth Avenue, Interior, View from Apartment Window Looking West Across Central Park*, c. 1931, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in., Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 2.4. Alfred Steiglitz, *From My Window at An American Place, North*, 1931, gelatin silver print, 7 7/16 x 9 7/16 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 2.5. *Sunday Morning on 5th Ave., New York City*, c. 1915, postcard, 3 ¼ x 5 ¼ in., Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 2.6. Samuel H. Gottscho, View Across [Central] Park at Fifth Avenue and 79th Street, 1930, acetate negative, 7 x 5 in., Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 2.7. Photographer Unknown, *Night Skyline, Central Park Lake. Taken From 5th Avenue and [around 98th] Street, Looking Down on Park*, 1936-37, 7 ¼ x 8 3/8 in., Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 2.8. Wurts Brothers, *Central Park, View from Roof of Pierre Looking West Over Park at Century and Majestic Apartments*, 1931, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in., Museum of the City of New York.
Conclusion

The photographs I examined in this thesis demonstrate that experiences of Central Park were not monolithic. The imposition of verticality on the Park carried different undertones depending on if one was looking up to it or looking down from it, strictly speaking, where one was stratified in society. As such, reading comparatively across the images from within and without Central Park, certain differences in visual perception become apparent and lead to questions about the park’s arguably nominal status as a comprehensively democratic space. Views within the park expressed verticality as a danger to the progressive and picturesque park, whereas views from the apartments of Fifth Avenue confidently rendered the horizontal and vertical realms of the metropolis congruent. The economic advantage of those with access to the elevated perspective indicates the extent to which social stratification played a part in constructing spatial and perceptual experiences of the Park.

I would link the dissonance between these perspectives with Moses’ treatment of Central Park’s spaces. As he democratized the Park’s use, the elevated view became synonymous with privilege. Further, due to his decision to keep the perimeter of the park undeveloped, nature continued to act as a buffer between the park and the urban environment. As a result, photographs from within the Park reinforce themes of an idealized American landscape established by Olmsted in the nineteenth century and furthered by preservationists during the Depression. In their view, nature was a panacea to the ills of urban society. While a progressive visionary in many ways, Moses’ decision
to leave the edge of the Park undeveloped caused the relationship between the urban and pastoral to remain equivocal, at least from within the Park.

As I have demonstrated, Moses’s choice was necessary to keep peace among Fifth Avenue residents and the rest of New York. Throughout his work on Central Park, Moses had to strike a balance between keeping the financial elite appeased and what he thought was right for the advancement of a democratic society. In July 1934, six months after Moses was officially named Park Commissioner, *New York Times* journalist S.J. Woolf, wrote an article, in which he quoted Moses on his approach to the management of the New York City parks system. In one statement Moses directly attributed the modifications of Central Park to the changing cityscape that surrounds it:

> The building up of the city around the park brought with it a necessity for change…The result is that what was originally intended to be kept as a haven for nature-lovers had to be modified. Playgrounds became essential so that today Central Park is a compromise.\(^{138}\)

While Moses democratized Central Park by adding recreational facilities, he was conscious of the disparities between what different classes expected from the Park. In separating active play and passive use as well as shielding recreation areas from the city with a natural barrier, Moses codified the gap between classes.

After Moses’s resignation as Parks Commissioner in 1965, most of his improvements to Central Park were not properly maintained, nor was the natural landscape managed with care. The Park was opened to large scale public events for the

first time since its opening in the mid-nineteenth century. These conditions took a toll on
the Park’s overall appearance and allowed it to become a nucleus of delinquent activity in
the city. For the next several decades concerned upper-class citizens expressed their
worries about the Park’s deteriorating conditions and organized committees to combat its
decline. In 1974 Central Park was declared New York City’s first Scenic Landmark,
solidifying its primary identity as a natural oasis.

The struggle between keeping the park a safe haven from the city and
simultaneously making it a feature of the city itself continued into the twenty-first
century. On June 26, 2015, Sarah Maslin Nir reported in the New York Times,

Of all the urban shortcuts, slicing through Central Park’s wide roads in a car,
bypassing street traffic just out of view through the park’s London Plane trees, has
to be the most bucolic. The verdant experience will be radically truncated on
Friday evening when, in an effort to protect the park’s bikers, joggers, bird-
watchers and pedestrians as well as limit air pollution in the park, the city will
shut the miles of north and southbound drives that sprawl along the parkland
above 72nd Street forever.139

Using the park’s roads as a shortcut reflects New Yorkers’ desire for expediency in a
fast-paced urban environment. The city’s decision to cut off the northern loops of the
Park drives, on the other hand, reveals a desire for a more natural place within the city.
Convenience takes a back seat to the preservation of the pastoral landscape and its users.

Fifth Avenue also remains a hotly disputed territory. In a December 31, 2015 op-
ed piece, Make Them Pay for Park Views, Max Frankel proposed, “the city impose a
relatively simple new tax—officially called a user fee—based on the grandeur of each

139 Sarah Maslin, “End of a Pastoral Shortcut For Central Park’s Drivers: Farewell Loops Through Northern
lofty view. The tax could be duly scaled, like rents, for the height of each unit, and
discounted, like theater seats, for undesirable obstructions. Informally, let’s call it the
“window tax.”140 The tax would be enforced on all four sides of Central Park, “the
Central Park Vista District.” With a window tax Frankel argues:

each tenant with a great vista would be paying a royalty for the privilege of
consuming the city’s boundless beauty, eyeballing and mentally photographing
costly municipal endowments, night and day, season by season. And the proceeds
of the tax would be spent on sustaining and enhancing the parks, streets and
waterways they gaze upon.141

It would compensate the city’s taxpayers for the payments that adjacent property owners
had evaded for over a century and a half. To this day, residents who own or rent property
surrounding the Park benefit from the actions of nineteenth-century landowners who
convinced the government that park development and maintenance should be funded by a
citywide tax. While Frankel’s proposal will most likely be difficult to pass in the state
legislature, if enacted, it will be the first time that citizens whose residence abut the Park
will have to pay a substantial fee for their privileged proximity to one of New York’s
greatest landmarks.

These recent articles attest to the ways in which the enclaves of Central Park and
Fifth Avenue still benefit the wealthy class. Despite Moses’ work in the 1930s, making
the Park beneficial to the greatest number of people without stripping it of its beauty
remains difficult. The constant transformations demonstrate that the creation of a
democratic space is not simply achieved through an open-access policy. Park planners are

141 Ibid.
constantly engaged in a struggle to try and resolve the competing desires. But for a public space to be truly democratic, there must be some integration and mutual understanding between classes. The division of spaces within the Park as well as the privileges afforded to those on Fifth Avenue challenge the purely democratic nature of Central Park.

Despite their ongoing friction, Central Park and Fifth Avenue are deeply intertwined on both a practical and ideological level. They do not simply exist next to one another, but mutually define their purpose and function and should be thought of as living spaces continuously shaped by class politics. The photographs have allowed me to examine visual representation as lived experience. I believe they re-imagine Fifth Avenue and Central Park through a modernist lens as an idyllic cityscape. While their total unification was the ideal, it was not always the reality. The photographs not only record their condition in the 1930s, but also mold and give meaning to their potential evolution. As visual transmitters of historical, cultural, urban, and social developments, they are a testament to a continuing legacy and ever-changing relationship between Central Park and Fifth Avenue.
Bibliography


