



AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS
NEW YORK
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American Museum of Natural History
Att.: Ellen V. Futter, President
Central Park West at 79th Street
New York, NY 10024-5192

September 23, 2015

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Dear Ms. Futter:

The American Society of Landscape Architects – New York Chapter (ASLA-NY) is a professional organization with over 600 members whose vision is to lead the design and stewardship of our land and communities. We advocate for the preservation of our city's green space especially as it relates to the health, safety and welfare of the local community. As Richard Louv states in his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* "Time in nature is not leisure time; it's an essential investment in our children's health (and also, by the way, in our own)."

We write you today due to our concern with the proposed expansion of the American Museum of Natural History in Theodore Roosevelt Park. The welfare of the neighborhood surrounding the park is enhanced by the existence and vitality of this treasured green space, designed by well-known New York landscape architect, Judith Heinz. DK Eyewitness Top Ten tour guides labeled the park one of the top ten oases in New York City and we believe it is in the best interest of the city that it be preserved.

While no plans for the expansion have been released to the public yet, the fact that the expansion will encompass 218,000 square feet of space, tells us that the new building will undoubtedly obliterate priceless green space and destroy ten or more stately trees that may well be over 50 years old. Those trees include at least one American Elm (*Ulmus americana*), a once significant urban species that was nearly wiped out by Dutch Elm disease. The value of these trees in particular and of trees in general in the urban environment cannot be underestimated. A team of researchers at the University of Chicago found that urban neighborhoods filled with trees enhance physical health in significant ways. Their research suggests that people who live in neighborhoods with a higher density of trees on their streets report significantly higher health perception and significantly fewer cardio-metabolic conditions. (*Neighborhood Greenspace and Health in a Large Urban Center*, by Omid Kardan, Peter Gozdyra, Bratislav Mistic, Faisal Moola, Lyle J. Palmer, Tomáš Paus & Marc G. Berman, 09 July 2015).

The expansion of the museum in this area would destroy one of the most enjoyable gathering spots in the park. The 79th Street/Columbus Avenue entrance is where neighborhood residents of all ages come together in a gracious, shady setting, to exercise or simply rest on a park bench; tourists stop on their way to the museum or Central Park, and landscape architecture students from City College learn about the way trees and shrubs shape space. The renovation of the park in 2000 incorporated many native plant species developed with the input of museum staff, and we encourage the museum to use it as a resource and opportunity for outdoor education in future plans.



Whenever mapped parkland is threatened, ASLA-NY is concerned, especially when it is lost to building construction. We are not advocating an anti-development stance. The museum's desire to enlarge their ability to educate is a noble one. However, we question whether that expansion should be accomplished on this site – a city park. Other cultural institutions seeking to expand have found facilities or property elsewhere to accomplish their goals. A recent example is the Metropolitan Museum's proposed repurposing of the former Whitney Museum for its modern works.

It is not a new phenomenon for parks to be looked at as developable real estate. Urban parks have always been threatened with similar development: Flushing Meadows Corona Park with the ever-expanding Billie Jean King Tennis Center and a proposed soccer stadium; and Central Park, from its very beginning, has been challenged by developers and well-meaning philanthropists. More recently, the Frick Collection proposed an expansion that would have destroyed their historic garden, designed by the internationally known landscape architect Russell Page. Our chapter worked alongside the Unite to Save the Frick organization to help preserve that garden, which we hope will result in a redesign that will save the much loved open space. Our members, landscape architects who practice in a predominantly urban setting, have a deep appreciation for the value of green space in a crowded urban environment and a visceral negative reaction when parkland, gardens and open space may be lost to buildings.

Landscape architects are active in the preservation of historic sites and parks, like Theodore Roosevelt Park. Our national organization has adopted a policy that states our commitment to the "preservation and protection of nationally, regionally and locally significant historic properties, districts and cultural landscapes" and that "the interpretation and public use of the historic properties and cultural landscapes should be viewed as an integral part of their preservation." Theodore Roosevelt Park, originally conceived as part of the historic Greensward Plan for Central Park, is named after the famed conservationist and 26th President, Theodore Roosevelt, and is a well-loved neighborhood destination deserving of thoughtful preservation.

The New York Chapter of the ASLA encourages you to reconsider this proposal. We appreciate your aim to create a center promoting scientific research and education; however, in terms of its impact on the well-being of the local and city-wide community, we believe the expansion is not in the best interest of the city. The museum's future should be planned to fully preserve this parkland.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Nitzky, President
Adrian Smith, Trustee
Marcha Johnson, Advocacy & Policy Committee Chair

American Society of Landscape Architects
New York Chapter