



## PARK PROSPECTS

**H**ENRY STERN, who until four years ago was Mayor Koch's Parks Commissioner and has just been appointed Mayor Giuliani's, has a gooey green mess on his hands. Central Park and a few other blessed success stories aside, the public parks of New York City have never been so filthy, so overgrown, so broken down, and so dangerous. The Department of Parks and Recreation was cut back devastatingly under the Dinkins administration. So Mr. Stern comes back to just over three thousand full-time employees; he had forty-five hundred before. That's fifteen hundred tree pruners, bench repairers, gardeners, graffiti removers, rangers on horseback, recreation directors, trash collectors, and comfort-station cleaners who aren't out there anymore to help keep the city's parklands—twenty-six thousand acres, the equivalent of thirty-one Central Parks—alive. The whole town has seen and hated the consequences: syringes in sandboxes, shattered lampposts, splintered benches, overgrown paths, deeply eroded hillsides, dead tree branches hovering ominously over playgrounds, four-letter words scrawled on seesaws, drug dealers quarreling in what's supposed to be a basketball court, every kind of garbage, from used condoms to abandoned automobiles, all over the place, and people using bushes and tree trunks as toilets in full daylight.

And it will only get worse. The new Mayor's preliminary budget plan, announced last week, calls for cutting two hundred and fifty-five more Parks and Recreation jobs by mid-1995. There's no money in the budget for new parks, and people everywhere are trying to grab land from old parks for non-green purposes—a firing range in Pelham Bay, a tennis stadium in Flushing Meadow, a garage for a hospital in Cobble Hill. New York still has three-quarters of a million street trees—our own urban forest, which is melting away faster than the Amazon rain forest. Every year, the city plants eight thousand street trees; every year, at least fifteen thousand die. Scores of once shaded city blocks are stripped back to nothing more than concrete, asphalt, and stumps. (Imagine the glare, the wind, and the blankness along West Eighty-first Street, next to the Planetarium, if it were to lose its majestic

double row of sycamores.) At this rate, most of today's schoolkids will be around to mourn the city's last street tree.

It's as if the plug were slowly being pulled on the whole long parks experiment that began in 1858, with the building of Central Park. But writing off parks as an unaffordable elitist frill would be a hideous, city-killing mistake. It would also be a political mistake of the first magnitude: a new poll by Louis Harris shows that ninety-five per cent of New Yorkers believe that parks are important to their lives—and rarely does any poll question about anything get a response in the nineties. There is an alternative to the decline, if Commissioner Stern and his boss are willing to fight for the idea that parks are as essential as cops and schools.

Six years ago, Bryant Park, right behind the New York Public Library, on Forty-second Street, was shut down for renovation. By that time, the park had grown so dangerous that a woman was murdered on its steps. Last year, after a glistening, nine-million-dollar, five-year overhaul by the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, it reopened. Now it's safe, as beautiful as a Seurat, and lovingly used. And, perhaps more to the point in this hard-headed city and this hard-hearted time, rents for offices that look out over Bryant Park have gone up as much as forty per cent. (That's something we have reason to know.)

New York first saw this caterpillar-cocoon-butterfly type of metamorphosis more than a century ago: In 1875, Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of Central Park, showed that in the seventeen years it took to build Central Park real-estate prices around it multiplied nine times, while land farther from the park only doubled in price. It's also been found that when you plant street trees on any block in a city, even in the most degraded neighborhoods, the price of a house or an apartment on that block jumps significantly. Parks and trees are green in more ways than one.

Rescuing natural areas can pay off, too. The old streams of southern Staten Island, for instance, are saving the city hundreds of millions of dollars because they can handle rainwater so efficiently that there's no need to build dozens of concrete storm sewers. And the streams give their part of Staten Island a series of sparkling parks, practically free. The New York region, still deeply trapped in recession, has lost a million jobs in the last four years. We've got to keep jobs here, and we've got to bring in new ones.

Lush, green, beautiful parks are one way to invite people to live and work—not to mention visit—here. John Dyson, the new deputy mayor for economic development, has proposed lavishing money on the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the hope of bringing in more tourists. What about resuscitating a world-famous tourist attraction like Washington Square Park, alias Drugs R Us?

For New York neighborhoods desperately staving off collapse and abandonment, creating parks can be a salvation: clearing and planting a vacant lot lets a community prove to itself that when people work together they can breathe life and safety back into a place. New York's community gardeners have saved a thousand vacant lots from desolation.

Parks and Recreation may not have the money that parks need, but other city departments do. Environmental Protection, for example, which is planning to build a sludge plant on a large slice of northern Staten Island, is spending just a little more money so that a hundred acres of leftover land can become a nature preserve. And General Services has three-quarters of a million dollars to spend on greening up vacant lots that won't be built on for years, so it can renovate places like Red Hook and the South Bronx right away.

What about private donations, and state money, too? Central Park has about the same number of people taking care of it that it had twenty years ago. Back then, they were all city employees, but now half of them get paid out of six million dollars kicked in every year by private donors. And Riverbank, New York's most popular, stunning new park, on the rooftop of a Harlem sewage plant, is paid for by the state. Public Space for Public Life, a new nonprofit group, has a hot-off-the-presses list of brand-new state and federal money sources that city parks can tap into—money for protecting the environment and building highways.

All this piggybacking of programs is essential, and must be the way we do things—so that every time we get better sewage treatment we're guaranteed more parks, and any new road will automatically bring with it a new greenway. There's a policy in there struggling to get out, and it needs leaders who won't allow themselves to say "We're broke" or "It can't be done." Mayor Giuliani, you're elected, Commissioner Stern, you're appointed. ♦