

A Matter of Taste: Pleasure Gardens and Civic Life

Phyllis Andersen

"To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up."

—Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*

"Popular taste is not a criterion that those who serve our public can respect." So said Mariana Van Rensselaer, the distinguished New York art critic and first biographer of architect H.H. Richardson. That remark, made in 1888, fueled the controversy that erupted over her criticism of flowerbeds in Boston's Public Garden. Describing them as crude hues in false situations, she took particular offense at 'Crystal Palace Gem' geraniums: "The cherry colored blossoms with yellow-green leaves are the most hideous products of recent horticulture." William Doogue, the Irish-born horticulturist in charge of the Garden's plantings, took exception to her criticism and also rebuked her social position, personal gardening habits, and Harvard-connected friends. Doogue defended his work as accommodating the general taste of the public, who loved his plantings. He protested to the local newspapers and the Mayor, and anyone else who would hear him out.

Was all of this brouhaha caused by some ill-placed geraniums, or was it indicative of a deeper division in how we imagine our public parks? This division is illustrated by the well-known story of the 1858 design competition for New York's Central Park, won by Frederick Law Olmsted and architect Calvert Vaux with a plan titled "Greensward." Their proposal offered a picturesque landscape evocative of the English countryside, combining rustic structures with meadows punctuated by groves, rock outcroppings, and sinuous water bodies. "Sylvan" and "verdant" were words used by the designers to describe their design as "a constant suggestion to the imagination of an unlimited range of rural conditions." The contrast with the majority of proposals from competitors—



A source of color and controversy, 'Crystal Palace Gem' geranium.

engineers, landscape gardeners, and talented amateurs—represented a remarkable shift toward the narrative of the picturesque. Other more traditional plans presented highly embellished gardens with formal promenades, fountains, arches, statues of Greek deities and New York politicians, bandstands, and extensive formal layouts of flowering plants.

By the mid nineteenth century, the educated public understood that the picturesque landscape was the aesthetic ideal for public parks, allowing the mind to wander along with the body. Among others whose opinions counted, economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen pointed to an upper-class predilection for public parks that were rustic and natural. Enlightened park advocates rejected the pleasure garden model with its emphasis on flowery display, theatricality, sociability, and amusement, believing its artificiality and "claptrap and gewgaw" lacked moral uplift and tasteful restraint.

Like sin and grace, the picturesque park and the pleasure garden are mutually defining. Olmsted used medical metaphors to promote his

notion of the park ideal: parks should be an antidote to urban ills, healing places for damaged minds. Calvert Vaux's famous comment on Americans' intuitive love of the country was at the core of learned park discussions. Vaux spoke of an "innate homage to the natural in contradistinction to the artificial, a preference for the works of God to the works of man." Supporters of the pleasure garden model rejected the imposition of rural scenery on the city and embraced the seductive lure of sensual sound, color, and light—a sustained Fourth of July celebration, an extended summer fête.

The Origin of the Public Pleasure Garden

The public pleasure garden originated in London in the eighteenth century with extensive public gardens established at Ranelagh, Marylebone, and Islington. But Vauxhall Gardens on

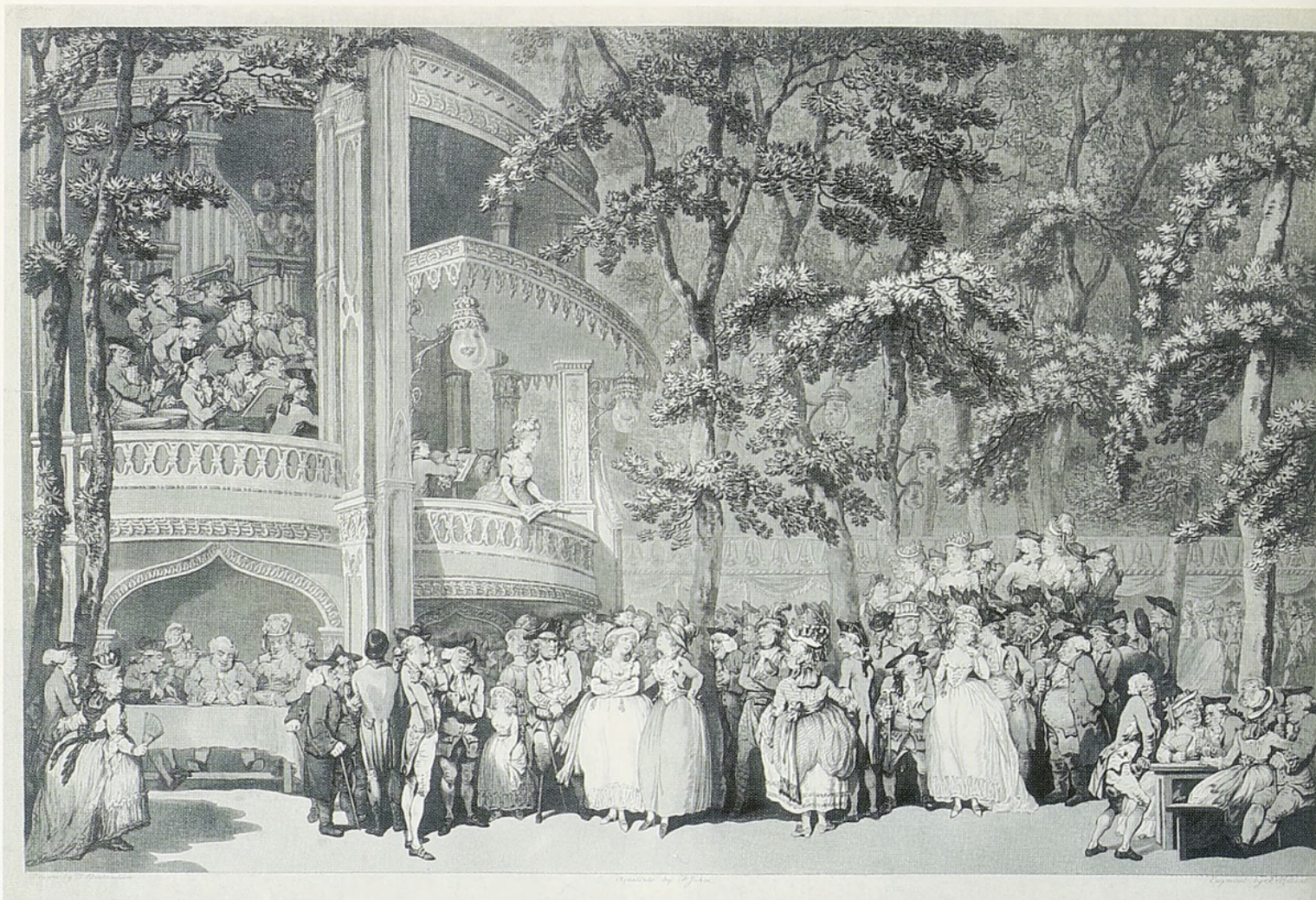
London's South Bank most completely and intensely captured the public's imagination. A favorite watering hole for Samuel Johnson, it was frequently used as a fictional backdrop by novelists. It offered grand promenades, open-air temples imitating ancient buildings, an array of dining and drinking pavilions, small theatres, bandstands, tea gardens, and private bowers for romantic interludes. Linking the attractions were elaborate flower displays of local and foreign blooms selected for color, fragrance, and mood-evoking exotic origins. There were fireworks and beguiling night-lighting in an era when both were rare. In its heyday, Vauxhall Gardens attracted aristocracy, royalty, and anyone who wished to mingle and immerse in an environment designed to please.

New York entrepreneurs transported the Vauxhall Gardens concept, name, and menu of



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Central Park's Sheep Meadow reflects the pastoral, naturalistic theme inherent in Olmsted and Vaux's winning design for the park.



Music, dining, and assorted other revelries made London's Vauxhall Gardens the place to see and be seen. *Vauxhall Gardens*, 1785, engraved by Robert Pollard II after Thomas Rowlandson. credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1959 (59.333.975). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

attractions to New York in 1805, to the area around Broadway and East 8th Street, which is now known as Astor Place. At the same time, even the less than sybaritic Hoboken, New Jersey created Elysian Fields, a popular waterfront park that offered ferry service from Manhattan, and where, some say, the first organized game of baseball took place. The last of the New York pleasure gardens, Palace Gardens, opened in 1858 (the same year as the Central Park competition). It offered the usual array of dining pavilions, water features, and elaborate night-lighting.

Legacy of the Pleasure Garden

Today, the tradition of the pleasure garden continues to influence the way we think about

urban parks. Certainly the questions posed 150 years ago continue to resonate: Who owns the parks? The planners? The middle class? The working class having no other options? And just as important: What is the purpose of a park?

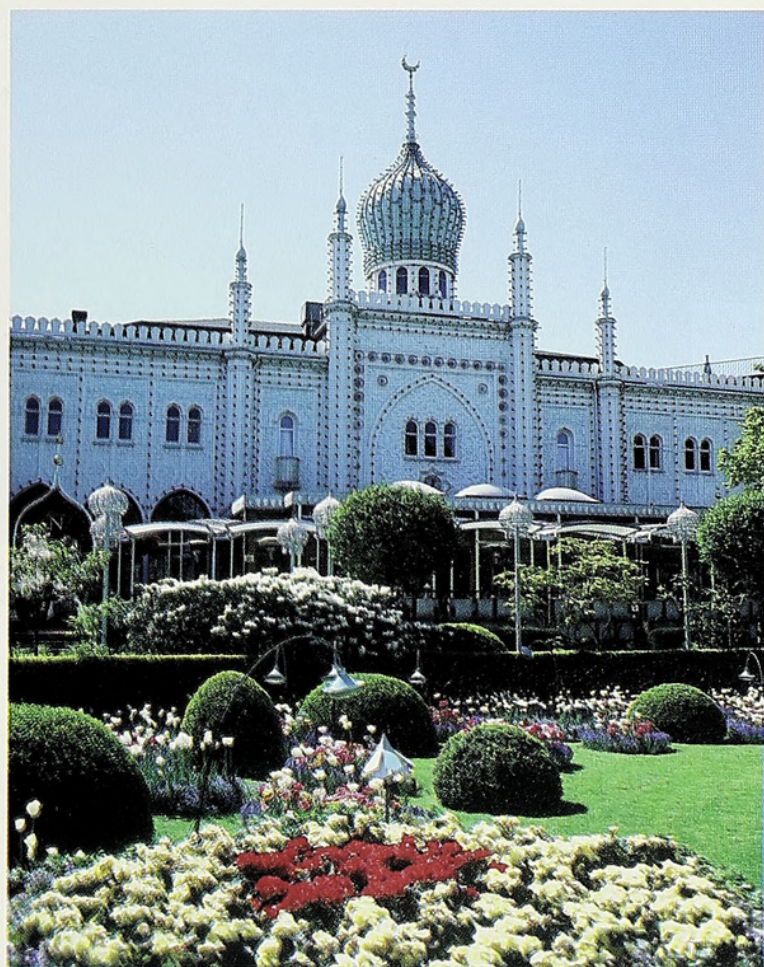
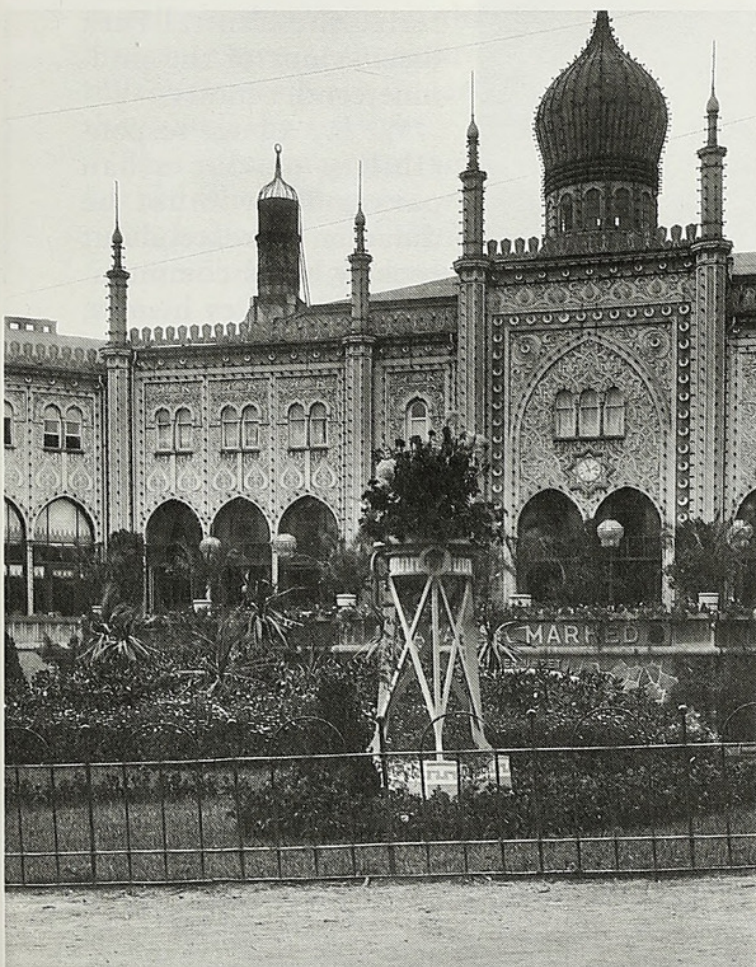
The success of the public pleasure gardens was due to diligent management by entrepreneurs who owned them and developed new attractions: balloon launches, water gondolas, music commissioned for special occasions. The eventual demise of the public pleasure garden was due in part to competition from new urban amenities: restaurants, concert halls, theatres, tearooms, and cafes dispersed throughout the city. It was due as well to the growth of petty crime that, then as now, often attaches to public venues that draw huge crowds. And some plea-

sure gardens, having contributed to the growth and desirability of the city, became victims of their own success and were lost to real-estate development pressures. The prototypical evocation of a pleasure garden that survived is Copenhagen's Tivoli, which opened in 1843. Patterned on London's Vauxhall and named for the beautiful resort town near Rome, it still offers families a complete pleasure garden experience with attractions interspersed among flower displays appropriate to the season.

The horticultural display of pleasure gardens, with its emphasis on seasonal flowering, evolved into civic horticulture—embellishment of city-spaces that are not within the purview of the professional landscape architect and most often maintained by gardeners trained through apprenticeship and guided by trade magazines. These plantings typically feature massing of large numbers of flowers of strong color con-

trasts arranged in geometric or pictorial patterns. Some traditions, such as the theatrical display of plants in graduated tiers, evolved from the eighteenth-century English estate garden into the public pleasure garden, as still seen in Boston's Public Garden today. Civic horticulture draws on a rich planting tradition that evokes admiration of both the beauty of the plantings and the ingenuity of the gardener. The immense popularity of the Rose Garden in the Fens section of Boston's Emerald Necklace, of the planted borders in downtown Boston's Post Office Square, and the grand flowerbeds at Copley Square are fine examples of horticulture that enlivens the city, akin to Pop Concerts on the Esplanade.

Although theme parks and amusement parks are obvious descendents of the pleasure garden, recent trends in urban public parks suggest that the pleasure garden is enjoying a renaissance



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TIVOLI

Modeled on public pleasure gardens such as Vauxhall, Tivoli opened in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1843. Tivoli's exotic Moorish-styled Nimf building is shown in 1910 (left), one year after being built, and as it appears today (right).



View in Public Garden, BOSTON, Mass.

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Beds of brightly colored annual flowers feature prominently in views of Boston's Public Garden from an early-1900s postcard (top) and a 2006 photograph (bottom).

of sorts. We are in the midst of defining a new urban park discourse, one that rejects the picturesque and encourages new kinds of urban engagement—drawing in the city, making use of technology, and embracing theatricality. Chicago's Millennium Park, an assemblage of cultural attractions and elaborate planting displays, lists "theatre consultant and lighting designer" as part of the design team. The team of Kathryn Gustafson and Crosby, Schlessinger and Small-

wood have developed a highly ornamental planting plan for the North End Park of Boston's Rose Kennedy Greenway. The Dutch horticulturist Piet Oudolf is acting as a consultant for a number of new urban parks in the United States, bringing his skill at highly textured perennial planting in changing seasonal patterns to a new audience. Yet, we still drag issues of public taste behind us, although now couched in concerns for environmental suitability, often with the same moral overtones that characterize the Central Park discussions of the mid-nineteenth century.

We lay a huge responsibility on our urban parks. They must be didactic, educate about ecology, unify communities, and convey history. They must exhibit good taste and local values. But if we are to sustain parks in cities, they must embrace the imagination of the public. The term "Disneyfication" is now an indictment, but one suspects that William

Doogue would have welcomed Walt Disney's words: "We are not trying to entertain critics. I'll take my chances with the public."

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