Sat, 11/16/2103: 1:30 PM - 3:00 PM
SAT-B03 Nature/Culture and Uniting Divided Constituencies in Urban Park Management
Education Session
Boston Convention and Exhibition Center
Room: 156
PDH Credits: 1.5

Speakers:
Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR, The Cultural Landscape Foundation, Washington, DC
Christopher Nolan, ASLA, Central Park Conservancy, New York City, NY
Christian Zimmerman, FASLA, Prospect Park Alliance, Brooklyn, NY

Abstract:
The ongoing care and management of urban woodlands involves balancing cultural design intent and natural systems and bridging constituencies that are often at-odds. The stewards of two major New York City parks -- Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn -- discuss the delicate balance of ecology, diplomacy, landscape architecture, and the perpetuation of design intent.

General Session Overview:
What does it mean to be sustainable in the stewardship of an historic landscape designed to emulate “the superabundant, creative power of nature” at the heart of a great metropolis? The woodlands of Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn are among the most historically significant designed landscapes in the country, they provide valuable refuge for wildlife, and they are a vital recreational resource for New Yorkers. When we expand our definition of ecology to include people and cultural values, and recognize that human activity is part of any ecosystem we touch, the question becomes not “how do we strike a balance between nature and culture?” but “how do we interact with nature in a way that is both meaningful and sustainable?” This panel, with stewards from both resources will address a range of relevant experience in the field of landscape architecture and environmental design in a discussion of woodland restoration and management in their respective parks. For both the panel, and the moderator who will set the stage, the presentations will have a shared datum that recognizes that:

- The woodlands of Central and Prospect parks were designed as “wild gardens,” one of several key landscape types carefully-orchestrated into a single scenic composition, for the purpose of providing a retreat from the city through what Olmsted and Vaux described in the case of Central Park as “the constant suggestion to the imagination of an unlimited range of rural conditions” from the picturesque to the pastoral. In the context of a landscape engineered and manipulated to transform swamps into serene lakes and sculpt sparsely vegetated flats into rolling meadows, the picturesque woodland landscapes—while most evocative of wilderness—were as contrived as the rest of the park (more, in some regards).

- The parks’ woodlands and their interface with their lakes and ponds—like wooded areas and wetlands (natural or constructed) throughout the city—are notable for their habitat
value. New York City is located on the Atlantic Flyway, the migratory route that follows the eastern coastline from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. Bird watching as a popular Park activity has increased has increased through the decades—but naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts have observed and documented the large number of species in the Park from its earliest days.

- For most of the 20th century, the woodlands suffered from management neglect resulting in erosion; overgrowth with self-seeding and invasive species; sedimentation and eutrophication of lakes, pools and water courses; and deterioration of paths, infrastructure, and rustic features. In a self-perpetuating cycle, the decline of the landscapes contributed to misuse (ranging from trampling and vandalism to illicit activity), which in turn further exacerbated the physical deterioration.

- In the last decades of the twentieth century, beginning with the appointment of dedicated park administrators and the formation of allied non profits (the Central Park Conservancy and the Prospect Park Alliance), this panel will explore, reveal, and evaluate lessons learned in the planning and management practices that have been tested over the past three decades. As part of this analysis, the following topics and themes will be probed:

1. The question of perspective when talking about sustainability in the context of a major urban park. The parks’ role in the viability of the City, the importance of people’s connection to the Park, their experience of it, and consequential value of the Park in making urban living sustainable.

2. Building consensus, managing agendas of constituencies with different perspectives, some of whom have a strong (and to some extent, justified) sense of ownership.

3. The Importance of diversity. Creating a progression of varied landscape experiences was a primary goal of the park’s designers. Within the landscapes themselves, diversity was also a goal. In the Ramble in Central Park and the Ravine in Prospect Park, both tropical and native plants were to provide a sense of lushness and intricacy and to create the effect of a "wild garden." Neglect of the park’s woodlands over a prolonged period resulted in a lack of horticultural and social (as well as scenic) diversity.

4. The role of people and the problems with the notion of “letting nature take its course”—why that’s not possible, and leaving the landscape alone is not sustainable. While the woodlands serve to provide the experience of escape from urban life, they are in fact urban landscapes—not wilderness.

5. What are the strategies for public education – how are woodlands and their management interpreted for the public? What role can volunteerism play in the stewardship of woodlands? How are woodlands “branded”??
Learning Objective

1) Learn how landscape architects and urban park stewards manage complex interwoven natural and cultural systems to address multiple constituencies.
2) Discover tools that address complex and overlapping agendas and competing interests.
3) Learn how stewards incorporate and balance contemporary ecological solutions with historic design intent.
4) Gain knowledge from a combined 50 years of pioneering practice and experimentation, what worked, and what did not succeed in an era of extreme weather events.

Speakers Bios

Charles Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR, is the Founder and President of The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF). Prior to joining TCLF, Mr. Birnbaum spent fifteen years as the coordinator of the National Park Service Historic Landscape Initiative (HLI) and a decade in private practice in New York City with a focus on landscape preservation and urban design. His recent projects include the web-based initiative: What’s Out There? (A searchable database of the nation’s designed landscape heritage) and oral histories with Laurie Olin and Israeli landscape architect, Shlomo Aronson. He has authored and edited numerous publications including Shaping the American Landscape (UVA Press, 2009) and the series, Modern Landscapes: Transition and Transformation (Princeton Architectural Press, 2013). In 1995 the ASLA awarded the HLI the President's Award of Excellence and in 1996 inducted Mr. Birnbaum as a Fellow of the Society. He served as a Loeb Fellow at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design during which time he founded TCLF. In 2004 Mr. Birnbaum was awarded the Rome Prize in Historic Preservation and Conservation and spent spring/summer of that year at the American Academy in Rome. In 2008 the ASLA awarded Mr. Birnbaum the Alfred B. LaGasse Medal and then the President’s Medal the following year. He is currently a Visiting Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture Planning + Preservation and a frequent blogger for The Huffington Post.

Christopher Nolan, ASLA, is the Central Park Conservancy's Vice President for Capital Projects and Chief Landscape Architect. He manages a staff of 50 that is responsible for all capital improvements and technical services in Central Park, including capital planning, project design, public review, construction, historic preservation, conservation, and the maintenance of the Park’s historic structures and infrastructure. In addition, he oversees departmental administration for both Operations and Capital Projects, including procurement, contract management and compliance, and general administration. Since joining the Conservancy in 1989, he has successfully managed over $75 million in capital improvements, including the restoration of the Bethesda Terrace Minton Tile Ceiling, Literary Walk, the Reservoir Fence, the 59th Street Pond and the Great Lawn. He is currently leading a comprehensive restoration of the
Park's 80 acres of woodlands as part of a larger program of work to address the Park's capital needs over the next ten years.

**Christian Zimmerman, FASLA**, is Vice President for Design & Construction of the Prospect Park Alliance in Brooklyn, New York. Throughout his 24-year tenure, he has been central to one of the most respected park restorations in the country. As the lead landscape architect for this landmark park, he oversees day to day operations for all capital design and construction. He leads an office of architects, landscape architects and historic preservationists who work with the city, park operations, community organizations, and user groups to balance the real but sometimes competing demands of historic preservation, natural resources and park maintenance with the needs and desires of the users. His nationally recognized work in historic preservation and design, his degrees in Horticulture and landscape architecture and his experience in designing for public spaces continue to guide the work of the Park's ongoing restoration.