

Damrosch Park

Although the proposal for Damrosch Park was not officially announced to the public until 1959, the inclusion of a park site had been a fundamental component of Robert Moses' plan for a performing arts center early on.¹ Among his many titles, Moses' job as the city's parks commissioner would not only have motivated him to establish public space, but also to have provided a setting for free outdoor performances. Thus, before Harrison's advisory committee had even been assembled, Moses' Committee on Slum Clearance had already determined that the city-owned park would be located on the southwestern corner of the Lincoln Center site. This allocation was then integrated into the advisory committee's master plan beginning in the fall of 1956.² In fact, as previously noted, in spite of later efforts by the advisory committee to eliminate the park altogether, Moses instead facilitated the acquisition of an additional block bordered by West 65th and West 66th Streets, and Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, to alleviate crowding within the northeast part of the campus.³

On July 29, 1965, *The New York Times* reported that the city's Art Commission had approved a 2.34-acre park that was to be located in the southwestern parcel of Lincoln Center.⁴ The park was to be named in honor of the Damrosch family, who had made significant contributions to the city's musical heritage in terms of performance and education.⁵ As noted earlier, Maestro Leopold Damrosch had been the founder of the Symphony Society, which merged with the Philharmonic to become the Philharmonic-Symphony Society, and later, the New York Philharmonic. His son, Frank, had founded the Institute for Musical Arts, which later became the Juilliard School, while Frank's brother, Walter, had given music appreciation talks to schoolchildren via radio broadcasts during the 1920s and 1930s. Frank and Walter's sister, Clara, and her husband, David Mannes, had founded the David Mannes School of Music in 1916. Mannes had also been the principle organizer of the Music School Settlement for Colored People in 1912. As a park area dedicated to the memory of the Damrosch family, a bandshell,

“suitable for outdoor concerts, plays and other performances” was to be the main attraction—named in honor of its donors, Daniel and Florence Guggenheim—and commissioned from the reputable firm of Eggers & Higgins.⁶

Located in New York City, Eggers & Higgins was founded by Otto R. Eggers and Daniel Paul Higgins, who had both joined the legendary John Russell Pope’s architectural firm in 1922. Following Pope’s death in 1937, the pair formed their own practice, which grew to be one of the largest in the country during the 1950s.⁷ Initially, Eggers & Higgins distinguished itself by completing the designs of their former partner, including Washington, D.C.’s National Gallery of Art (begun by Pope, 1935; completed by Eggers & Higgins, 1941) and the Jefferson Memorial (begun by Pope, 1937; completed by Eggers & Higgins, 1943). New York projects completed during this same period included Cardinal Hayes High School (1941), located on the Grand Concourse at the southeast corner of East 153rd Street; Brooklyn War Memorial (1951), located on the northern portion of Cadman Plaza; Governor Alfred E. Smith Houses (1952), between South, Madison, and Catherine Streets and St. James and Robert F. Wagner, Sr., Places; and New York University’s Vanderbilt Law School (1955) at Washington Square South, between Sullivan and MacDougal Streets, and Holy Trinity Chapel, Generoso Pope Catholic Center (1964), also at Washington Square South, located on the southeast corner of Thompson Street. Among the firm’s commercial projects were New York City’s Canada House (1957), Morgan Guaranty Bank Building (1961) and Jacob K. Javits Federal Building (in association with Alfred Easton Poor and Kahn & Jacobs, 1967); Pittsburgh’s One, Two and Three Gateway Center (1952), and Bloomington’s Willkie A and C Quadrangle (1965).

Eggers & Higgins’ design for the Daniel and Florence Guggenheim Bandshell, employing an onion-shaped section for its design, was a contemporary gloss on the late 19th-century Eastern European tower motif. Housed on the western perimeter of the park, the bandshell stands approximately fifty-five feet high, seventy-five feet wide and fifty-six feet deep, and was built to accommodate seventy-five musicians. Structurally composed of slender

reinforced concrete ribs, the concrete mass of the shell was applied through a spraying process called Gunitite.⁸ According to the designers, the purpose of the pointed apex was to enhance the acoustics by projecting sound down to the audience.⁹ In front of the bandshell, Eggers & Higgins designed a paved open area with alternately-colored waves of terrazzo-like aggregate. This area allows for 4500 people for either concert seating or festival events. Behind the bandshell, the firm created a lounge area for the performers, as well as audience facilities.

Although the New York City Parks Department had originally hired Richard Webel of Darling, Innocenti & Webel to do the landscaping of Damrosch Park, it eventually relied on Daniel Kiley to refine the design. After receiving an enthusiastic response to his design for the Plaza North, Kiley was asked to collaborate on Damrosch Park. Kiley remembered:

I worked very closely with all the Lincoln Center architects—Eero Saarinen, Pietro Belluschi, Gordon Bunshaft of SOM, Philip Johnson, Max Abramovitz, and Wally Harrison. All gave enthusiastic and unanimous approval to the final design, as did John D. Rockefeller III, so much so that Richard Webel, who had been assigned the design of Damrosch Park, was directed to incorporate precepts of my plan to assure site continuity.¹⁰

In contrast to the traditional park scheme originally submitted by Richard Webel, Kiley's final design bears his unmistakable imprint.

Ken Smith, in recounting the history of landscaping for Damrosch Park, detailed Kiley's involvement in the project. Smith noted that while Webel was delegated to determining sites for a memorial flagpole and sculptural relief panel, Kiley had the more practical tasks of dealing with schedules for plantings, drainage studies, planter seating and a prospective fountain.¹¹ Smith also relates that the Parks Department had originally wanted the planters to include backrests, which were later eliminated in favor of Kiley's low-riding travertine planters.¹² In terms of the plantings themselves, while Kiley disagreed with the Parks Department's planting of Ginkgo trees and "miscellaneous types of shrubs," he endorsed the inclusion of London plane trees—already implemented in Plaza North—parallel to the Metropolitan Opera House's south side and the New York State Theater's west side, and the grove of Sargent crabapple trees

grouped in a rectangular configuration along the eastern border of the bandshell's audience area. Like his specifications for Plaza North, Kiley provided the Parks Department with thorough instructions as to the maintenance of these species, concerned that a lack of such would compromise both the park's aesthetic and the roof of the parking structure below.¹³

Damrosch Park Opening and Critical Response

Despite plans to open in the summer of 1966, several circumstances prevented Damrosch Park from officially opening until spring 1969. Included among these delays were the temporary housing of building machinery for the Metropolitan Opera House within the park's perimeters, and the completion of a parking facility below grade. In addition, on September 27, 1967, *The New York Times* reported that the project was further stalled because the Parks Department had not yet paid Eggers & Higgins for work relating to this and other projects. This delay caused David Eggers to withhold construction drawings from the city agency until his firm received its compensation.¹⁴

Finally, after settling the payment matter and completing the work, the Parks Department opened Damrosch Park to the public on May 22, 1969. In attendance were Mrs. John V. Lindsay; John D. Rockefeller, III; Parks Commissioner August Heckscher; and Marya Mannes, representing the Damrosch family. Former Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, commenting on the past delays, remarked, "There's been an awful lot of bungling, especially in the last few years."¹⁵ Unlike the other plaza areas and buildings at Lincoln Center, Damrosch Park was not extensively reviewed upon completion. In addition to the *Times* description in which reporter Donal Henahan wrote that it "looks like a Spanish onion sliced in half," a critic for *Progressive Architecture* similarly described it as "a halved onion with a point," while Robert Kotlowitz, writing for *Harper's Magazine*, referred to it as "ugly."¹⁶

Alterations to Damrosch Park

In the early 1990s, several different types of alterations were made to Damrosch Park. In 1990, light towers were installed to enhance bandshell performances and anchor rings to secure the tents of its winter tenant, the Big Apple Circus.¹⁷ In 1993, twelve London plane trees were cut down in an effort to stave off a fatal tree disease known as cankerstein.¹⁸ According to Ken Smith, subsequent meetings in 1995 between modern landscape preservationists and Lincoln Center management after this time enabled some of Kiley's original choices to be reinstated.¹⁹

¹ For the planning of Damrosch Park, see Young, "Preliminary Architectural Planning: 1956-1959," pp.80, 85, 87. For background on the design of Damrosch Park, see Smith, "The Challenge of Preserving Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts," in Birnbaum, pp.51-52, and William F. Farrell, "Art Agency Approves Lincoln Center Park Plan," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1965, p.17.

² Young, "Preliminary Architectural Planning: 1956-1959," p.80.

³ *ibid.*, p.87.

⁴ Farrell, "Art Agency Approves Lincoln Center Park Plan," p.17.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.17. For a specific listing of Damrosch family contributions to New York's musical culture, see Murray Schumacher, "Damrosch Park Sounds a Quiet Note," *The New York Times*, August 4, 1972, p.33.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.17.

⁷ For Eggers & Higgins, see Steven McLeod Bedford, "Eggers & Higgins," in Placzek, ed., p.12.

⁸ Farrell, "Art Agency Approves Lincoln Center Park Plan," p.17.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁰ Quoted in Smith, "The Challenge of Preserving Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts," in Birnbaum, p.51.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.51.

¹² *ibid.*, p.51.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁴ Donal Henahan, "Architect Refuses to Give City Plans for Lincoln Center Park," *The New York Times*, September 27, 1967, p.42.

¹⁵ Quoted in Donal Henahan, "Lincoln Center Fanfare For Park and Band Shell," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1969, p.36.

¹⁶ "looks like...": Donal Henahan, "Lincoln Center Fanfare For Park and Band Shell," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1969, p.36; "a halved onion...": as quoted in Stern, "Lincoln Square: Plaza," p.713; "ugly" in Robert Kotlowitz, "If You Must Build A Cultural Center," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1967, v.235, p.96.

¹⁷ Shepard, "At Lincoln Center, It's Regilding Time," p.B5.

¹⁸ "Destroying Trees to Save Them," *The New York Times*, September 19, 1993, VIII, CY, p.8.

¹⁹ Smith, "The Challenge of Preserving Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts," p.52.