

Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Before the Art Commission of the City of New York
Regarding Proposed Reconstruction of Heckscher Playground Landscape
February 9, 2004

In general, the Committee is pleased with the proposed final design of the historic Heckscher Playground, Central Park's first and largest playground. The playground's centerpiece are the two "adventure-style" play areas designed by Richard Dattner and built in 1969 and 1972, both of which remain largely intact.

In particular, we applaud the sensitive treatment of the Dattner-designed play equipment and feel that the added safety features are in keeping with the materials and spirit of the original play structures. We also appreciate the effort to soften the large expanses of asphalt inside the playground. The idea of introducing artificial turf to Central Park gives us some pause—we are not aware of it having been used elsewhere in the park and, in most cases, we believe it is inappropriate. Here, however, its limited use seems judicious, particularly because it is incorporated in such a whimsical and obviously "artificial" manner. This use should in no way establish a precedent justifying its use in other parts of the park.

Perimeter Fencing

While we are pleased that the Conservancy is considering alternatives to the existing chain-link perimeter fencing, we are not in favor of the proposed mesh and wood rail fence. Instead, we recommend iron-picket fencing such as is used throughout Central Park, especially for playground enclosures. The pure simplicity and ubiquity of this type of fencing are among its primary virtues and would best accomplish the Conservancy's goal of "disappearing" into the landscape.

Bridle Path

In our previous testimony on this application, we urged the Conservancy to rethink the terminus of the bridle path. The current proposal improves on existing conditions by creating a defined end to the path. However, it also shortens it. We suggest looping the path around so that it ends less abruptly and functions better for riders, walkers and joggers who use the path, allowing them to comfortably stop and turn around. Two mounting blocks would be an additional enhancement. Improving the path terminus, but keeping it in its current location will also help with the inevitable desire line that will be created as people cut across the park diagonally (specifically from the 7th Avenue crossing of the drive to Pinebank Arch); a desire line across the bridle path is preferable to one across green space and is easier to maintain.

Path System

Finally, we appreciate the Conservancy's efforts to rationalize the path system and integrate gentle curves rather than sharp corners. Yet, a major shortcoming is that the proposed configuration does not accommodate the natural tendency of park visitors to cut diagonally across the park from Central Park South to the West Side. In an effort to correct this desire line we strongly discourage the Conservancy from resorting to fences and barricades.

We are grateful to the Conservancy for presenting to our Committee and keeping us closely informed on the progress of this proposal. We hope that these comments are helpful to the Art Commission in its review.