CENTRAL PARK CONSERVANCY
central to the park

RESTORATION OF THE BELVEDERE
Project Description

Located on the west side of Central Park, just north of the 79th Street transverse road, the Belvedere is one of the most visited destinations in the Park and the visitor center with by far the highest volume of foot traffic. Conceived as a vantage point on some of the highest ground in the Park ("Belvedere" is literally translated from Italian as "beautiful view"), it offers sweeping views, today, across the Great Lawn to the north. The views and the Belvedere's context are dramatically changed from what they were in the original construction of the Park as a result of the most significant physical transformation in the Park's history: the filling of the old Croton Reservoir and creation of the Great Lawn in the 1930s.

Background

The Reservoirs

The original Park landscape encompassed two receiving reservoirs within its boundaries. The original reservoir on the site (known as the "Old" or "Lower" Reservoir) was constructed in 1842 to receive water traveling through the Croton Aqueduct water distribution system, on a site roughly between the projected lines of Sixth and Seventh Avenues, from 79th to 86th Street. Plans for a second, larger reservoir needed to increase water storage capacity for the growing city initially called for a rectilinear shape similar to the existing facility, but the Croton Board was persuaded to alter the design to a more organic shape that would fit better into its park context. The 106-acre "new reservoir" was constructed concurrently with the Park, between 86th and 96th Streets. Typical of the era, the reservoirs were popular places of interest for the public, and both offered promenades around their perimeters where visitors could stroll, take in the open air, and admire the impressive works of civic infrastructure.

The two reservoirs were among the few existing features that Park designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux were required to accommodate; they presented an obstacle to the creation of a continuous landscape and uninterrupted rural experience, dividing the Park into what Olmsted and Vaux referred to as the "lower park" and "upper park." They also influenced the locations of the transverse roads required to carry crosstown traffic across the Park, three of which were placed at the boundaries of the reservoirs—at 79th and 97th Streets on either end, and 86th Street between the two. To construct the sunken 79th Transverse, it was necessary to blast a tunnel through a massive outcropping of rock at the southwest corner of the old reservoir. The outcropping, dubbed Vista Rock by the Park's creators for the expansive views it offered in all directions, was the site of a fire tower of the Croton Reservoir Board through the early years of the Park's construction. In 1866, that Board granted the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park use of the "small rocky piece of land within the old reservoir inclosure" for the purpose of park circulation, scenic improvement, and erection of a picturesque structure that would command broad views of both the lower Park and the Reservoirs—the Belvedere.

Belvedere Construction

By 1867, construction of the Belvedere was underway. Olmsted and Vaux originally conceived of the Belvedere as two masonry structures connected by an esplanade overlooking the reservoirs. By 1869, the larger structure and tower on the east side of the esplanade was substantially advanced. But by 1870, the mounting costs of implementing the work had become

so prohibitive that it became necessary “to eliminate from the plan every item of extravagance that could be avoided consistent with the then condition of the building.” Accordingly, the second structure at the northwest corner of the esplanade was eliminated from the plans and replaced by a wooden open-air pavilion with a colorful slate roof, echoing the other pavilions on the esplanade and the upper terraces of the structure, but with the additional element of a decorative wooden tower that served as a counterpoint to masonry tower of the main structure. This change occurred in the midst of a larger change affecting the Park: during the reign of the Tweed machine, the existing Board of Commissioners was ousted and Olmsted and Vaux were removed as the Park’s landscape architects for a period of eighteen months. In their absence, architects Jacob Wrey Mould and Julian Munckwitz (both of whom had been working under Olmsted and Vaux) advanced the project, which was nearly complete upon their return in November of 1871.

Conceived as an open air folly without windows or doors, and serving solely as a lookout tower, the castle-like gothic masonry structure was constructed at a diminutive scale, so as to appear more impressive when viewed from a distance. From the tower and terraces, Park patrons were afforded broad views to the north across both reservoirs.

In 1919 the U.S. Weather Bureau, which had been operating a meteorological observatory out of the Arsenal in the Park, relocated to Belvedere. Windows and doors were installed, enclosing the structure, and the conical slate roof of the Belvedere tower was removed and replaced with a flat roof and crenelated parapet to accommodate weather monitoring equipment. A set of steps and an entrance to the lower level of the structure were added on the east side of the building.

Filling of the Reservoir and Construction of the Great Lawn

The next significant change in the history of the Belvedere occurred with the filling of the old reservoir, which would dramatically alter the structure’s relationship to the Park. Constructed on the rocky promontory that jutted into the southwest corner of the reservoir, its strong visual connection to the masonry wall of the reservoir—which had served as a promenade—had been suggestive of a castle and fortress. Running parallel alongside the wall, between it and the 79th Street Transverse Road, a straight walk known as “Lover’s Lane’s” led from the Belvedere to the east side of the Park. All of this would change following the decommissioning of the reservoir in 1929, and the ensuing incorporation of the reservoir site into the Park. In 1930, the reservoir was drained and a plan to construct a “Great Lawn for Play” in its place was adopted. Filling of the reservoir site began in 1933, and the Great Lawn and Belvedere Lake were constructed between 1934 and 1936. The strong linear wall of the reservoir was replaced by the green shoreline of Belvedere Lake (restored by the Central Park Conservancy in 1997 as Turtle Pond), and Lover’s Lane was replaced by a more typical park path than the perfectly straight route that once ran alongside the reservoir.

Early in the 1960s, the U.S. Weather Bureau installed an automated weather monitoring system in the building that required no staff, and vacated the offices. In the two decades that followed, the Belvedere fell victim to the decline and abuse that affected the Park, and the City, as a whole. One of the Conservancy’s earliest projects was a restoration of the shuttered vandalized structure. It was reopened as a visitor center in 1983 following a project that included reconstructing the crumbling parapet walls and terraces; replacing most of the original cast iron structural beams with steel; recreating the wooden pavilions and the original roof on the tower; installing wood and plexiglass windows; and repaving the esplanade. A subsequent project, completed in 1996 in connection with a the establishment of the Henry Luce Nature Observatory, included outfitting the interior for this purpose and replacing the wood and

plexiglass windows with steel frame windows and gothic-inspired ornamental grilles for the purpose of security.

In 1999, the Conservancy constructed a accessible ramp by-passing the stairs on the south side of the esplanade that lead toward the Ramble and the east side. However, there remains no accessible route to the Belvedere due to the extremely steep slopes of paths leading to this point.

Existing Conditions

The Belvedere today exhibits a number of building envelope issues resulting both from decline in the decades since previous restoration efforts and areas that have never been thoroughly addressed. These include:

- Poor drainage resulting in standing water on the esplanade and upper terraces have contributed to deterioration of the parapet walls as well as water infiltration into the structure.
- Inadequate exterior drainage has resulted in iron oxide staining on exterior masonry.
- The wood pavilions on the esplanade and upper terraces are showing signs of deterioration.
- Pavements on the esplanade and upper terraces and stairs leading to them are deteriorating.

Additionally, the extreme topography of the site—so integral to the unique design and primary function of the structure as a "belvedere," or lookout—also presents considerable challenges with respect to making this essential park experience universally accessible. The stairs leading to the Belvedere on the west side and the steeply-sloped path connecting it to the east side are not accessible, and there is no accessible route from the Ramble on the south.

Project Goals

- Implement a comprehensive core and shell restoration of the existing historic structure.
- Modernize mechanical systems and supporting utilities.
- Address the accessibility of the facility.

Scope of Work

<u>Belvedere Restoration</u>

- Restore parapet walls and terraces with effective drainage and waterproofing systems. Replace missing portion of original coping on parapet of second floor terrace.
- Clean and repoint exterior masonry.
- Restore the wood pavilions, and recreate the decorative wood tower at the northwest corner that was not included in the scope when the pavilions were recreated in the 1980s.
- Replace existing pavements in esplanade and upper terrace and restore stairs. Hexagonal asphalt pavers installed in the 1980s will be replaced with square bluestone pavers of contrasting tones in a checkered pattern, as per the original design executed in 1871.
- Replace existing windows, main entrance door, and upper terrace doors with clear-pane glass to evoke the original character of the structure as an open-air pavilion.

The project will also include replacing interior finishes including bluestone ceiling and floor panels, modernizing mechanical systems, and upgrading utility services.

Belvedere Access:

To address the challenge of making the Belvedere accessible, we are proposing to create an accessible route from the East Drive, the design of which draws on aspects of the history of the site. Specifically, it evokes the precedent for: a strong linear progression to the Belvedere from the east side; the Belvedere's originally integral relationship to the reservoir's retaining wall; and the experience of broad views from the elevated vantage point of the promenade along the reservoir wall.

The scope of the proposed design includes:

- Regrading and realigning the existing park paths between the East Drive and the Belvedere to create an accessible route across the total elevation change of 25 feet.
- To accomplish the required grade change, the path south of Turtle Pond (in the vicinity of the old reservoir and promenade) will require a retaining wall and parapet in order to raise the elevation.
- While located roughly along the route of the existing path (to minimize impact on existing trees and connect with current park circulation), the path will be straightened to recreate the linear progression of Lovers' Lane and the reservoir wall and the experience of approaching the Belvedere from the elevated promenade on the reservoir wall.
- The design of the wall will be based on an existing retaining and parapet wall constructed in the 1930s at the northeast corner of the Belvedere to resolve the change in relationship between the Belvedere and it's surroundings when the reservoir was removed.
- Viewed from the park landscape to the north across Turtle Pond, stretches of the wall visible in the winter will evoke the historic relationship between the Belvedere and the reservoir wall. Denser vegetation in the warmer seasons will obscure the path to a greater extent, resulting in stippled views of the wall.
- The new grade at the east side (rear) of the building will be approximately six feet higher than the existing grade, creating at-grade access to the staff touch-down space and restroom on this level. (The existing stairs—which were added along with the service door by the U.S. Weather Bureau in 1919—will be removed).