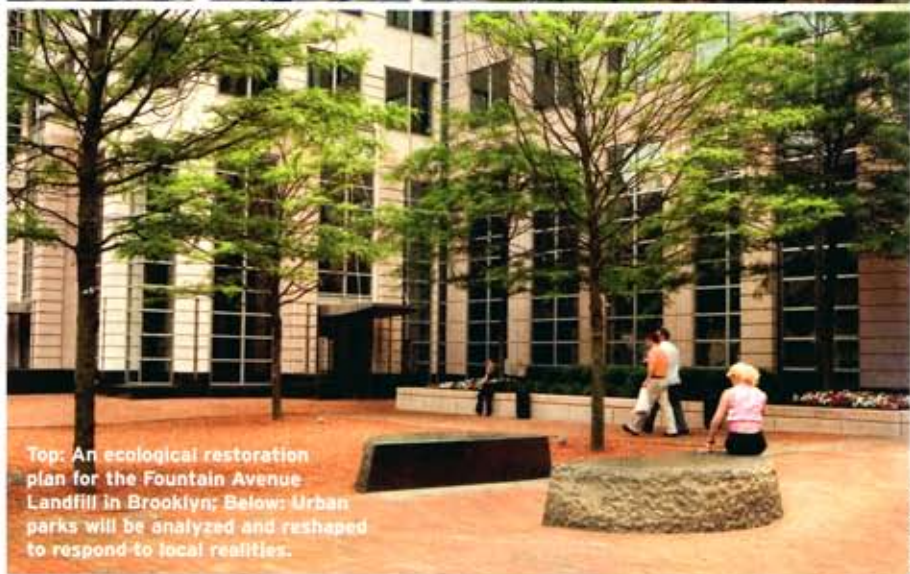


FIRST NEW GUIDELINES FOR PARKS IN HALF A CENTURY

# Grass is Greener

COURTESY NYC DEP



Top: An ecological restoration plan for the Fountain Avenue Landfill in Brooklyn; Below: Urban parks will be analyzed and reshaped to respond to local realities.

COURTESY EDAM

The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation is getting ready for a revolution in the way it designs, builds, and maintains its parks. Under new regulations contained in a document still in draft stages and entitled *Park Design for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: High Performance Landscape Guidelines*, the city's parks will not only become more environmentally sustainable, they will also look literally greener.

At first glance, the proposed changes may seem prosaic. They include encouraging the use of tree trenches containing multiple trees and understories of plants in certain areas, for instance, instead of the standard tree pits that predominate throughout the city. And in many parks, New York City will be phasing out traditional park benches, which used slats made of tropical rainforest wood, and instead experiment with new bench designs and other types of materials such as recycled plastics and Black Locust, a renewable hardwood.

Yet the new guidelines—the first in 50 years—are part of an ambitious overhaul of New York's overall ecology. Developed by the Design Trust for Public Space in conjunction with the Parks Department, the guidelines are expected to play a significant role in reducing climate change in the region. "Parks have traditionally served cities for social reasons—health and exercise," said Deborah Marton, executive director of the Design Trust for Public Space. "But the point is to make parks into something that they haven't been before—infrastructure to improve the overall quality of our lives—so they can be used to cut down on sewer overflow; they can be used to recharge groundwater; and they can be

used to improve air quality."

Although individual Parks Department designers have been keeping up with some of the new sustainable practices that have now become commonplace in the landscape architecture profession, the department as a whole needs to make a paradigm shift in the way that it does business, said Marton. "There are parks that still use drinkable water for irrigation, and that just makes no sense," she said. "And instead of filtering stormwater runoff through plants, most parks still take runoff from parking lots and dump it in the sewer system."

The new ecological approach will have major implications for park aesthetics. According to Charles McKinney, chief of design at Parks, "Twenty-first century landscape design is really about respecting what is there as much as possible—the root zone around the tree, the existing water course and drainage patterns—as opposed to making a new thing of beauty that does not necessarily relate to that place."

Parks designed under the new guidelines will most probably look messier than the urban parks that New Yorkers are used to, noted Marton, adding that under the proposed changes there will be more foliage and new landscape forms such as "rain gardens," or meadows that turn into marshy areas to trap stormwater.

Although park designers will be required to think more holistically about design, there should be plenty of room for creativity: "Landscapes are only as good as they are comprehensible. So it is going to be up to the landscape architect to use the strategies in this book to make them readable to users," Marton said. **ALEX ULAM**