Wilderness Engineered

by Dare Dukes

Whether we abandon the engineered landscape in favor of the wilderness or whether we embrace it, we are expressing an identical attitude toward the environment; and that attitude is essentially that of the engineer. The landscape is no longer the locus of character formation, for carrying out traditional obligations; it is now a place where certain resources can be bought or had for free. Our objective is that of the engineer: to accumulate energy, whether psychic or physical, and then to transfer it to the city.

—John Brinckerhoff Jackson

What artist so noble, as he, who with far-reaching conception of beauty and designing power, sketches the outline, writes the colours and directs the shadows of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed upon it for generations, before the work he has arranged for her shall realize his intentions.

—Frederick Law Olmsted

Socrates Sculpture Park frames—as much as the objects that define its express purpose—a picture window looking out onto the Erector Set work-in-progress that is Manhattan. From the vantage point of Hallett's Cove, New York bustles with anthill complexity, evoking a roil of awe, pride, and sadness.

Awe because though every day we are inconvenienced by Manhattan's never-ending, clanging fabrication, the soaring results mock our comprehension. What sleight of engineering could possibly hold that gangly tonnage together? *Pride* because, whoever these magicians are who maintain this illusion in steel and glass, they are guys and gals just like us, and with enough practice maybe we could learn to pull off such tricks. *Sadness* because we can detect, in all that mad elbowing upward for air and light, the City's shameful disparities of power and wealth. Examined from different angles, the built environment of Manhattan can be an extraordinary collective accomplishment and our grossest, most extravagant folly.

Whether monument or mistake, from the shores of Hallet's Cove, viewed in the right light and through a slight squint, the City looks like a Tinker-Toy model in 1:5,000 scale, ready to be

razed with a few swift kicks from the peripatetic twerp who steadied the pile. Its unbelievable fortitude is just that: unbelievable. By its very nature as a product of human toil, it looks puny, uninhabitable, and downright fake, like a mockup made by an obsessive-compulsive. And what is this impression but a child's-eye premonition of the cityscape's ultimate fate, be it by foot, wrecking ball, or natural causes? Knowing that things no less fallible than our own two hands piled those stones and fitted those girders is reason enough to believe that the fortress will eventually fall. Still, in rigid denial of this inescapable fact, the skyline soars, a clutch of totems satisfying our desire for permanence—and for exhilarating change.

To put it another way, the view easily rivals any wonder the natural world has to offer.

Wilderness

When the word *wilderness* first appeared in English in the 13th Century, it described a remote and desolate reach of peopleless, uncultivated land, "a tract of solitude and savageness." Such a word is useful more to an agrarian rather than a nomadic culture, a culture intent on rooting itself to the earth and whose survival is dependent upon its capacity to subjugate and order the surrounding environs. The mysterious wastelands beyond the civilized centers represented potential both for limitless expansion and eventual destruction. Because a lack of technology and an abundance of domestic duties strictly limited most people's movements to what by today's standards is an unimaginably tight radius, the wilderness was chiefly defined by invisibility. The average person's knowledge of these lands was based on third- and fourth-hand reports. And with enough fairytales and ghost stories going around, the imagination could cast the wilderness with its most nightmarish conjurings. Even the vast black universe surrounding Earth in the 21st Century cannot compare in immutability to the ominous otherworld circumscribing the medieval town.

As John Brinckerhoff Jackson described it, the medieval mind perceived the land in three concentric circles. In the civilized center men and women toiled to define their space, plowing fields and building homes. Immediately encompassing that was uninhabited but still useful land, owned by no one and therefore a natural repository of communal resources, such as firewood, game, herbs, and vegetation for the grazing of livestock. Beyond that was the wilderness, which, whether sinister forest or arid wasteland, separated and protected isolated settlements from each other.[1] As the root of the word makes clear, the wilderness was *wild*, a place where chaos reigned. It was the environment where, for instance, St. Francis in Giovanni Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert" miraculously receives the affliction of Christ's wounds. It was the landscape where errant knights of Medieval romances disappeared, metaphorically died, threw off the flimsy adornments of civilization, and reemerged transformed. It was the storm-blasted heath of Lear's abject exile, his only companions a fool and an apparent madman. It was not the place for a family's weekend retreat.

When God banished Adam and Eve from Eden, he booted them out of the civilized center and into the wilderness, forever making adversaries of humanity and nature. Since then the wilderness has been a place where burning bushes talk and serpents tempt. The early white settlers in the New World—a world which, as seemingly virgin wilderness,[2] had the capacity to evoke both Eden regained and hell on earth—carried this idea of nature with them from across the Atlantic. Many of them refugees of religious persecution, they recast the Old Testament with themselves as

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[1] "In the traditional medieval concept of the universe," according to John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "the whole world was…divided into three spaces: one was where men lived and where they created their own defined spaces—gardens and plowed fields. A second was the open space where cattle grazed and where there were no fences, and a third space was everything beyond. In Latin these were called, respectively, *ager*, *saltus*, and *silva*: 'horrida silva,' according to Tacitus. In English they were village and arable (or landscape in the strict sense of the word), grazing or common or wasteland (including woodland), and then wilderness." "A Pair of Ideal Landscapes," *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 45.

[2] Current scholarship—much of it still controversial—suggests that large portions of what early European settlers mistook for untouched wilderness were, in reality, the results of decades of widespread and concerted landscaping by Native Americans. See Charles C. Mann, "1491," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 2002).

protagonists, wandering the apparently infinite wilderness in search of Zion. The indigenous peoples they met were "servants of sinne and slaves of the divell,"[3] walking embodiments of the spiritually "barren parts of the world."[4] The morally privileged position the white immigrants gave themselves would be the foundation for the centuries of violence to come, against both the native populations and the land.

Declawing the Wilderness

So continued a very western strain of history's central plot, also known as *progress*. Both heroic epic and horror show, progress is the never-ending story of our struggles to overcome the stubborn obstacle that is nature. Whether manifest as our own mortality or the maddeningly fluctuating environment we were born haplessly into, nature is our greatest antagonist. For most of history, the natural world has been a sure victor over our best efforts: Around the homestead, it drowned or scorched our crops, fatally frostbit our kin, razed our dwellings and hurled them skyward. In the remote and inhospitable regions known as the wilderness, nature defied our laws and understanding, harbored our gods and demons, and swallowed the wayward traveler into its oblivion without a trace.

No more. Enough of the world's peoples enjoy enough of the benefits of progress that popular consciousness believes we are inoculated against most of nature's bad moods. As complex and continually evolving as the natural world and our perception of it is, most days nature appears to us to be no deadlier than a pothole or bumblebee, at least not if we keep our hands on the railing and mind the flashing signs.

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[3] Alexander Whitaker, "Good Newes from Virginia," *Early American Writing* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1994), p. 105.
[4] Ibid.

But isn't this the privileged view of inhabitants of wealthy nations? What about the misery we see nightly on TV? Without a doubt, wealth, perhaps more than any other factor, shapes this view of the natural world. In Ethiopia a drought means death; in the United States, it means putting a brick in the toilet tank. Technology exists that can neutralize or mitigate nature's extremes, but too much of the world's population has no access to it. That antidotes to mass misery are withheld despite their availability suggests that greed and apathy—a.k.a. human *nature*—cause more needless suffering than drought, crop failure, and plague.

The elements haven't gotten any weaker since the Ice Age, but our defenses against them—*e.g.*, central heating, all-weather siding, insulation, and thinsulation—have gotten stronger, almost neutralizing, it seems, nature's potential for destruction. A freak blizzard used to mean gutting a pack horse and holing up in the innards; now we simply pull over, keep the engine idling and the radio on, ration processed foods with life expectancies longer than our own, and wait for the plows. Nature still bites back with an occasional hurricane, volcanic eruption, or earthquake, but by and large we have tamed it with our technology and, thanks to our sheer numbers, continue for the time being to outlast what lethalities remain unpredictable. The wilderness has been explored and triangulated, certainly, and, in regions enough to our liking, colonized and civilized. Those areas that don't visibly bear our marks are no less ravaged by our doings: the ocean's valleys are rancid with our waste and the atmosphere's see-through ceiling is tattered with rocket holes. The few examples of ruthless wilderness still left on the planet—*e.g.*, Antarctica, Mount Everest—were long ago "conquered" (to use a martial metaphor that westerners are fond of). Explored and mapped, the wilderness has been, in effect, denatured, and, as a result, no manner of *National Geographic* special can rekindle the boundless fascination it once held as a blank canvass, as an unknown.

We have always seen the natural world through the lens of our own desire, and that desire has taken every imaginable form on a metaphysical spectrum anchored by spirituality on one end and materialism on the other. There was a time when nature could bear without strain the full weight of our dreams and nightmares. Whether we longed for a god in heaven, a satyr behind a bush, or the purest, most unimaginable chaos, the mysteries of the natural world provided the raw stuff for our metaphysics, cosmologies, and mythologies, allowing both impulsively superstitious and arduously teleological explanations.

"A howling wilderness," Thoreau wrote, "does not howl: it is the imagination of the traveler that does the howling."[5] Abandoned by our collective imagination, the wilderness no longer howls. It has been forsaken by gods and demons alike to become the outdoor laboratories of specialists and the hand-me-down obstacle courses of cash-liquid adventurers.

Once largely invisible due to its remoteness, the wilderness can now be seen. Aided by high-resolution satellite imaging and intrepid camera crews, our sight now penetrates the globe's remotest valleys and mountaintops; and Dopler radar, the local meteorologist's crystal ball, gives us a glimpse into the future, if fuzzily and not always reliably, providing us with temporal buffer enough for the donning of galoshes or evacuation, whatever the case may necessitate.

Once characterized by bewildering vastness, the wilderness now fits nicely in our topography's back pocket. Exterior space has measurable limits—even the universe, they say, has an end. As stupefying as that may be for the scientifically disinclined, times have changed since a Copernicus could observe paradigm-shifting phenomena with nothing but the bare-naked eye, and those without gadgets must place their faith in science more than the five senses.

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[5] Henry David Thoreau "The Allegash and East Branch" The Maine Woods, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 3 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), p. 242.

While the limits of space have come into sharper focus, our built interiors have expanded, subsuming more and more of our exterior space. Our interior spaces have grown so large and incorporate so many of the qualities that used to be unique to the outside that many of us see no reason to exit them. From screened-in porches to the skywalks of downtown Minneapolis to sports arenas with retractable domes, the varieties, interconnectedness, and malleability of our manufactured interiors are as endlessly complex as massive Habitrails. They foster in us the impression of almost uninhibited movement. They mimic or are permeable to many of the best exterior elements, like sunlight, while shutting out the worst, like frigid cold and man-eating beasts (those extant, at any rate).

And in many cases, even when we have to go outside we don't actually have to go outside because our interiors are now portable. These mini modules of interiority are motor-driven, jet-propelled, and wash-and-wear, allowing us to "brave" the elements without exposing ourselves to them. Whereas for centuries our lives depended on maintaining impervious boundaries between our interior and exterior worlds, these borders become more fluid the more we can, like tortoises, wear the life-sustaining characteristics of interiority on our backs. Additionally, much of what's left of the exterior world we've engineered to accommodate our travel between interior spaces, so much so in some cases that the only real qualitative difference between inside and outside is a perceptible motion of the air. The canyonlike avenues of New York City, for instance, encompass space that is neither wholly interior nor exterior, but something in between.

It is no secret that we have so scarified the globe with our interiors and quasi-exterior landscaping that only a few islands of putative "untouched" nature remain. So few that nature, once the awesome outward manifestation of the same force that starts and stops our hearts, is now perceived as a big and especially pretty back yard. Nature used to threaten us, now we threaten it. So, by governmental decree, what lands could be saved from the boot of progress have been

cordoned off and given a new name: park. That we would legislate the preservation of lands once considered a threat to both our safety and our cultural aspirations, and that some of us—a very particular demographic—will periodically pack up our freeze-dried mint-chip ice cream and "get back" to these lands, illustrates how far we've come. The journey may not be a complete about-face, but we've come far enough around that everyone but oil tycoons now sees beauty in the barren. And in a parodic display of self-deception, we apply our most advanced sciences in maintaining the "natural" state of these lands. Wilderness is defined more by trail markers now than by trees and rocks and streams.

The denotation of *wilderness* has not changed much in seven hundred years, but our perception of what it describes has been turned on its head. In the traffic-jammed and franchised 21st Century the wildness of those lands is not life-threatening but life-*giving*. A dearth of people and a lack of order make for pleasant diversion. For good reason, we fear savagery more in our alleyways and empty parking lots than we do in the backcountry of Yellowstone, and so we "return to our natural origins" in search of a serenity that the medieval mind simply would not have found there.

Does this mean that the paradigm reflected in the Eden myth—nature vs. humanity—is withering? Hardly. But most of us, still as alienated from our innocent selves as any old Adam or Eve, have shifted allegiances within the same schizophrenic tug-of-war. The moral framework that urges us to build is just as apt to feed our growing dread of the consequences of our rampant shortsightedness.

Regardless of the moral values we assign nature and humanity, to view them as warring opposites is to deny that we—our most beautiful and our most heinous selves—are part of nature. As basic as this fact is, we seem to need constant reminding. We cannot isolate ourselves from nature by installing triple-pained storm windows. The natural world is as close as our own heartbeat,

as insistent as a hangnail. Our unique capacity for reason does not, in the long run, make us any less susceptible to the earth's cycles. Our gasping physiognomies, flabbergasted and biased brains, and all-too-often plain embarrassing impulses are as much a part of nature as turds and typhoons. Admitting ourselves into this kingdom forces us to make concessions that are tough to reconcile with the nature-is-good formula: Hot-glued spandex is as natural as a dew-dappled leaf. Nuclear fusion is as of this earth as a newborn doe. Our built environment is no more an aberration to nature than an anthill.

The backwoods getaway doesn't help us revisit our humble origins. Quite the opposite. Paradoxically, such sentimentalizing only re-chalks the perceived boundaries between us and the natural world, bolsters our notion of nature as a resource made for our use (and misuse), and strengthens the illusion that we are immune to the force that in the end gets us as sure a trail-shoe gets a slug.

Central Park and the Last Frontier

Socrates Sculpture Park is the scrappy grandchild of Central Park, the safe harbor of green that the makers of Manhattan carved out of its center. New Yorkers take great comfort in knowing Central Park is there when we need it to provide a natural-world respite from the workaday concrete sea. The orientation of park within city turns Jackson's description of the medieval landscape's concentric circles inside out: the "natural" center protects its visitors from the surrounding chaos of the built world.

The joke is on us, and we gladly play it on ourselves. No more natural than 42nd Street, Central Park is one of the first and greatest accomplishments of landscape architecture in this country. It exemplifies our conflicted desire for a chaste natural world that has nothing but our best interests at heart.

The acres of our nation's wilderness areas do not exhibit the same papier-mâché quality as Central Park, but this is in some sense due to how our aesthetics have changed since Central Park's design, not to how virginal those lands are. Their apparent wildness is in keeping with fashion, a desire for a landscape that bears no mark of the hands that make our sprawl. Keeping them that way requires as much annual care, engineering know-how, and money as our Interstate System. Just like Central Park, our national parks are not outside of but are central to our infrastructure. The nature that we see when walking in the woods is not in opposition to our notion of a modern civilization, but is a core element of it. Nature has been civilized.

Walk the Ramble in Central Park and you'll get as close as possible to experiencing the park the way Frederick Law Olmsted intended. Olmstead brought a Victorian landscape aesthetic to a city fast devouring those areas now referred to as "green spaces." Reacting against the formal symmetry of French gardens, the Victorians planted theirs with a calculated haphazardness, capitalizing on nature's chaos then reigning it in, or "beautifying" it. Their gardens invited the visitor to wander among exotic plants and happen upon the surprise delights of a pastoral countryside. Think of it as bucolic splendor without the manure.

On one hand, the Ramble—with its switchback dirt trails, its brooks, and its potential for the isolated encounter with the natural environment, all echoed in its name—exemplifies the illusion of the contemplative and edifying maunder that Olmstead had in mind. The rambler moves through a verdant maze but finds comfort in the delineated path that, like fairytale breadcrumbs, points the way out.

But the city has changed tremendously in the years since the Ramble's completion, and there is now much that is menacing about the walk. The nooks and crannies that in the 19th Century might have hidden an imaginary fox or rabbit now provide camouflage for members of our own species intent on attacks far more vicious than anything a chipmunk can launch.

With our natural environment apparently at our beck and call, it seems that there is more life-threatening wildness, more wilderness, in our own unruly natures than in our forests and deserts. *We* are what is most scary about the world—it wasn't high winds or the finger of God that toppled the World Trade Center towers.

Our cities are the fearful playgrounds of this wildness. While the streets of New York City are owned by all, shelter is a rare commodity and never easy to find in a sudden downpour. One need only look out a building's back window into an alley to be flooded with images of forbidden and foreboding spaces, glimpses of their shadowy inhabitants, and speculations as to the tangled stories that are unfolding in those murky worlds. The backwoods are accessible now, but most New Yorkers have keys to no more than a few thousand square feet of all the billions that New York encompasses. Our own creations—like cell phones and laser surgery—elicit our devout awe these days. Our own creations, like imperceptible biological weapons and an unlit New York City sidewalk, conjure our worst nightmares.

Though we may have engineered the threat out of the wilderness, it still lays waiting, strong as ever, in our hearts and in the environments we build.