

# 128th Street Harlem: An Open Approach to Social Inclusion

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**During the 1960s in New York City, the urgency of a solution to urban congestion was reflected in a socio-political proposal which launched a new concept for the generation and maintenance of new collective space. The proposal promoted a focus on small scale interventions and the recycling of abandoned lots throughout the city. The result was revolutionary as a formula of improving the inclusion of social diverse spaces and reducing the plague of poverty and pollution suffered by entire neighborhoods. Politicians, members of the Park Association of the city, architects, planners and philanthropists decided to focus on new ideas to deploy on one street which became an experimental field for new open space: 128th on Harlem.**

## INTRODUCTION

A revolutionary concept for regeneration and maintenance of public spaces was introduced by the new Mayor John Lindsay administration in the 1960s in New York City. The new draft called “White Paper”<sup>1</sup> was created to reform obsolete parks and recreational facilities. It was written by the new Commissioner of the Department of Parks and Recreation, Thomas Hoving, and launched a concept for the generation and maintenance of new public space. The proposal promoted a focus on small scale interventions and the recycling of abandoned lots throughout the city. Although these small interventions might not seem relevant today, they were revolutionary as formulas for incorporating new open space in the city that countered the adverse affects of poverty and pollution suffered by entire neighborhoods through the inclusion of socially diverse spaces.

Politicians, members of the Park Association of the city, architects, planners and philanthropists decided to focus on new ideas to deploy on one street which became an experimental field for new open space: 128th in Harlem. The progressive celebration of the ‘public’ in New York cannot be understood without these first heroic prototypes that with limited resources were able to accomplish the goal of social inclusion in the city. Looking at these past examples, one can reflect on the recent ongoing and complex interventions which demonstrate the constant and

non-stop transformation of New York’s collective space. The definition of public space understood as an area for the collective population, identifies and raises questions about how recent works like the High Line, 9-11 Memorial, the pedestrianization of Broadway, among others, incorporate ideas of social diversity in their funding, investment, maintenance, and ultimately the role of citizen participation in them. The process, management and construction of public space does not always make clear who proposes them, or why and who decides for whom they are being designed for. Are today’s new infrastructures being thought by everybody and for everybody?

These small experimental prototypes which took place in Harlem positioned a radical shift from the normative concept of large urban interventions by providing public space through the recuperation of many small abandoned open spaces and green areas. However, this idea of the micro park was not new. In 1897, the Danish journalist Jacob Riis was the first photographer interested in social urban issues and was aware of the multiple opportunities the city could offer for the betterment of social inclusion. Riis wrote: “Any unused corner, triangular, or vacant lot kept off the market by litigation or otherwise, may serve this purpose as well. (...) There are such corners and lots to be found around the city, the property sometimes of the municipal corporation, and these could be used to advantage and without expense.”<sup>2</sup> These potential small areas were named “vest-pocket parks” because of their reduced dimensions. However, none of these pocket parks were built until a half century later when Hoving recycled this idea in the draft of “White Paper” in 1965.

The draft was a true revolution in the socio-politics of public space. According to Hoving, it would: “in short make all parks beautiful and fun for the first time in a generation.” Hoving wrote later in his memoirs that Robert Moses summoned him to his office after the publication of the draft to persuade him to stop the campaign of small parks. Moses told him: “I read that disgraceful paper you wrote for the Mayor and it’s a cockamamie dream. Vest pocket parks will be vandalized in a day. Your idea of having teams rehabilitate playground in a day is Tomfoolery. Local people can’t be clients; they’re too dumb.” To which Hoving replied: “Mr. Moses, you did a lot for the parks many years ago but you never gave a damn about getting sufficient money for maintenance or



Figure 1: Children looking out their window into the pollution of their alley. Harlem, New York City. Photo by James Maher (1966).

recreation. After your marvelous Jones Beach you didn't give a damn about good design. Since then the designs of playgrounds are closer to prison compounds than places for fun."<sup>3</sup> But Moses not happy with Hoving's response, went on to declare in an article in the New York Times that the program would be a disaster for the city. Moses declared: "The plan for the vest-pocket park is very expensive and impossible to administer. These tiny parks will not bring light and air to the neighborhoods where they are built and will in the end prove to be neighborhood nuisances." The article also included the statement by the President of the Council for Parks and Playgrounds who criticized Moses in this way: "Participation by citizen groups is very much to be encouraged. For the past 15 years no local groups could get to the Commissioner. Now we are working smoothly and receiving good cooperation from Mr. Hoving. This is not to say that we necessarily agree with him on all points."<sup>4</sup>

#### THE CHOICE OF 128TH STREET

In 1964, on 128th street between Fifth and Lexon Avenues, in the heart of Harlem, there were and are still five churches on a single block. One of them, the Christ Community Church and its reverend Linnette Williamson, left a profound legacy on the community. Williamson founded the New York Council of Smaller Churches to organize thousands of micro churches across the city. The Williamson's project caught the attention of an expert Committee from the Parks Association of New York City. The Committee headed by Whitney North Seymour Jr., was investigating possible locations and sponsors to build small parks with an emphasis on Harlem, which suffered a notable shortage of recreational facilities.

The Christ Community Church was selected because it met three essential elements: location, an organized infrastructure that could purchase land to host the project and a high degree of involvement of

its parishioners to guarantee its maintenance. The church was located on a congested block filled with dilapidated housing. 128th Street was a secondary traffic street which made possible optimum conditions to improve the quality of life. The block had numerous children per apartment building, which meant there was an overwhelming need for a proper play space that would remedy the need to use the stoops, sidewalks and street. To alleviate this situation, the church had already bought from the city a lot adjacent to its building. In addition to this lot, there were two additional empty lots on this same block which the Committee from the Parks Association found to be advantageous.

Finally in 1965, the Parks Association of New York City, the current Parks Council, began soliciting help from private entities for the first pocket parks. The three sites on Harlem's 128th street were selected to inaugurate the small parks project that would be funded by the Christian Community in Harlem and the philanthropist Jacob Kaplan. The three pocket parks received a lot of attention from the media, which led to a proliferation of the pocket park typology throughout the city. For Hoving these spaces needed activity, because "A park is like a stage (...) If you leave it sitting, nothing good is going to happen."<sup>5</sup> To guarantee this activity, Hoving sought to improve existing parks through a number of innovative small-scale interventions specifically designed to revitalize, instead of the standardized playground designs of the time of Moses. In the words of Hoving: "Most city playgrounds have been built in the W.P.A. style of park design. Swing, slides, seesaws, and a comfort station. The same things, in the same unimaginative order, have been repeated all over the city, in park after park. It's the oldest architectural style in the Western world. The designers who planned these things almost never visited the sites. Nine hundreds playgrounds alike."<sup>6</sup>

#### THE THREE VEST POCKET PARKS IN 128TH STREET

Having decided on the location of the pilot project and with the support of private funding, acquiring the properties was the only remaining task. The administration launched a restricted auction only allowing those

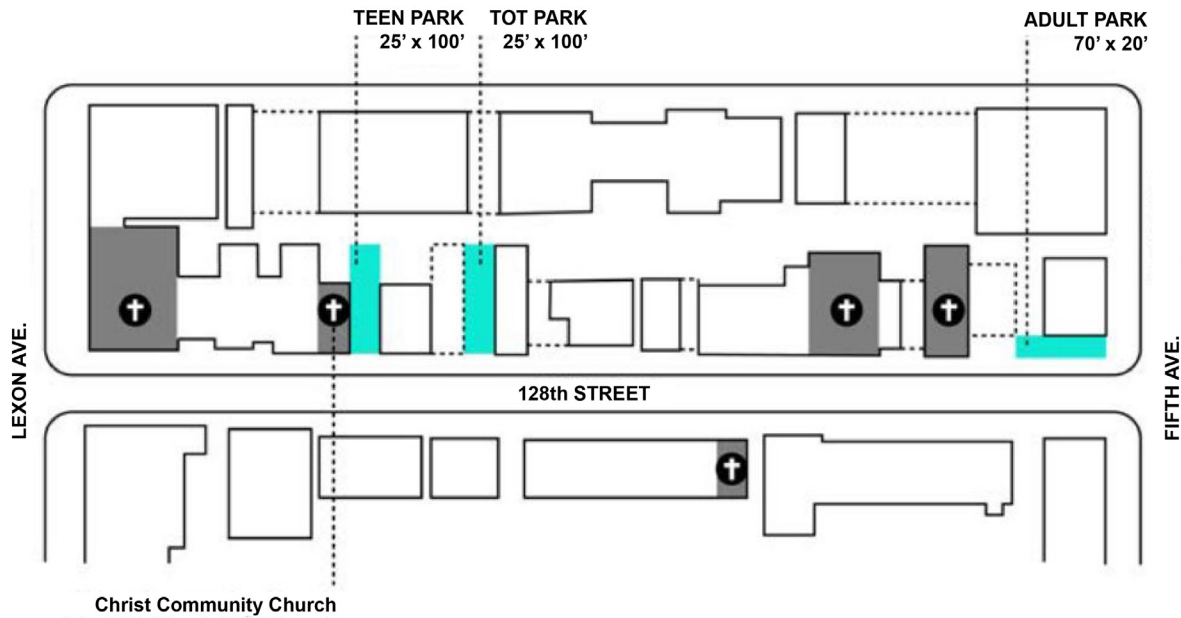


Figure 2: Location three pocket parks on 128th street in relation with the five existing churches in the same street. Diagram by the author.

interested in bidding to acquire the spaces for recreational or religious purposes. Finally, the Parks Association managed to acquire the three plots and therefore the possibility to generate three types of spaces. With money from donations and city funding, a budget of five thousand dollars for each lot was established. The fundamental idea was to test three solution for the creation of three different types of public space, based on three different audiences.

- A teen park, a park intended for recreational and sports activities for older children and teenagers.
- A tot park, a playground for children under ten years.
- And an adult park, a meeting place and seating for adults.

#### THE TEEN PARK

The Teen Park was thought for children and teenagers of ten years or older. It was the first pocket park in New York and was one of the most successful parks in the community. The park was located at 65 128th Street, adjacent to the Church of the Christian Community in Harlem. The site had a space in between two properties, with a 25 foot front and 100 foot depth. The construction of the park was a success in the sense of being an intergenerational and interdisciplinary process: it was designed by a student of architecture, built by church members and finally the walls were decorated with murals by young neighbors. The park consisted of two parts and was designed to accommodate a flexible program. At the back there was a pergola on a stage that could be used for table-tennis, while movable tables and chairs gave the space the appearance of a small cafe. The walls at the front were heavily decorated with vibrant murals, while both of the party walls had several baskets to convert the space into a basketball court during the day. Overnight, mobile tables and chairs made it possible rearrange them furniture in the

park and enjoy it as a social space. The metal fence that closed the park was decorated with vertical wooden elements which in conjunction with the stimulating murals on the walls produced a contrast to the surrounding context and attracted the attention of the passerby.

On May 1965, neighbors, community members, organizers and politicians inaugurated the Teen Park. More than five hundred people attended the opening which was held as a block party. The creation of the first pocket park received a wave of local and national media attention. Government members including the Secretary of Interior, Stewart L. Udall, Senators as Robert F. Kennedy, local politicians such as Mayor Robert F. Wagner and representatives of the Bronx, Jonathan B. Bingham and Hugh L. Carey Brooklyn, visited the park. All of them described it as a model to follow for the design of open space. It was so well received that Secretary Udall announced the formation of a committee on parks, recreation and open space to study the needs of the city and pledged help from the federal government. The committee would be formed by representatives of private agencies, the federal government, the state and the city. Udall, during a tour of the city, declared that New York in his opinion was “losing its battle to conserve open spaces and provide recreational facilities for its population” and continued “there is not enough open space, and there is too much pollution of water and air.” Robert Kennedy advocated, after the visit to the park, that the city needed to draw attention to the underpublicized need for open spaces and parks. In the words of Kennedy: “We have thousands of young people with no place to play and no place to go. We have thousands of old people with no place to get sun except to stand in the streets.”<sup>7</sup>

#### THE TOT PARK

The second pocket park in the city was destined to be a playground for children ten years old and younger. It was located very close to the Teen



Figure 3: Opening of the “Adult Park” by Robert L. Zion. This pocket park was considered the “Paley Park Uptown.” Ross photos (1965).

Park and was identical in size. The park was designed to make the construction of it very easy, but in reality it was the one which had the most problems. Very few photographs were taken of this park; however, based on its description by one of the Committee members, Julian R. Paterson, it is easy to reconstruct the small space. “The design was simple. The rectangular space was divided into three roughly equal areas: the rear area was covered with a surface of wood bark, and a large tree house was built in the center, the middle area was a large sandbox, with an old wooden rowboat placed in the center; and the front area was covered with concrete with picnic tables placed on it. The park also had a jungle gym that children could climb on it.”<sup>8</sup> On a visit to the park reported by the *New Yorker* magazine, Hoving proudly showed the park describing the elements as the following: “That jungle gym, cost three hundred and fifty dollars. These little parks are not expensive. If we own the land we rent it to the people in the block for about fifty dollars a year. We put in most of the equipment, but the people in the block do somethings by themselves. For example, that mural.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the most important issues for design was deciding on the type of materials suitable for the children to use. The main concern was if they should be durable materials such as concrete and steel or use softer

materials like wood and plastic which would need to be replaced more frequently. According with Julian R. Peterson, the final decision was to choose both materials: “A small wooden house on four stilts is settled in the back of the lot. It was so popular that it lasted only one summer, so it had to be replaced the following year. Most economical, and most popular was an old wooden boat, placed on blocks that seemed to be floating on the wooden box, also it lasted a summer. The latter was skillfully replaced by a “boat” built with metal pipes and also installed in the sandbox as a scalable element.” The success of the park was clear from the number of times that the elements needed to be replaced and according to Peterson: “A good park need really be little more than a level, clean area with a few simple wooden play devices.”<sup>10</sup>

#### THE ADULT PARK

The last of the pocket parks built on 128th street was the most sophisticated park and the one that the Committee was the proudest of. The use of the park was the most innovative as it was destined for a place of rest and contemplation for adults. The adult park unlike the previous projects was built and designed by professionals. Its

#### 128TH STREET TODAY

Fifty years after the implementation of this pilot project, its reading is very different. On one hand, the success of the three parks is



Figure 4: Edward P. Bowman Park is one of three spaces maintained by the Williamson Memorial Park Association. Photo by Mark Abramson (2015).

Its architect, Robert L. Zion, would go on to design Paley Park in Midtown one year after completing the 128th street park. Both projects shared many similarities and the small adults park on the corner of the 128th street was considered “Paley Park Uptown.” The design consisted of a small grid of twenty trees very close together, which offered a pleasant, leafy oasis on the corner of the street. Visually, the small grove offered an unusual green spot in an otherwise hard urban setting, while inside the park, one could sit under a refreshing canopy. The effect that Zion sought was a fresh green forest, like a miniature version of many Parisian parks.

One of the new ideas introduced by this project was that it wouldn’t include a perimeter fence. Zion had to opt for this decision motivated by several reasons. On one hand, the corner location between 128th street and Fifth Avenue, was much more visible than the other two projects that were between party walls and their visibility was much more limited. This position and heightened visibility contributed in an important way to guarantee security through exposure from both streets leaving little opportunity to vandalize the space without being seen. On the other hand, the narrowness of the site, just twenty feet in width, would cause a claustrophobic atmosphere

if enclosed and at the same time add unnecessary costs to the already limited budget. Without a perimeter fence the trees would engage the two street and the park would become an extension of the surrounding sidewalks.

Zion’s choice of materials was simple and exquisite, combining materials like concrete and wood that were very durable and easy to replace. The spatial performance focused on the inner perimeter of the park. Zion took advantage of the perimeter and alongside the neighbors designed two wooden benches to allow for more linear feet of seating. On the facade of Fifth Avenue a small extension in the form of a wooden wall was built to control the overexposure of the corner and offer residents an intimate environment for congregating. “This is a great block.” Zion declared in one visit to 128th street. “But we need these things everywhere. We have found that the only people in the immediate block use the small parks. Larger parks draw people from as far as eight blocks away, but that seems to be maximum. The Department of Parks owns about fourteen thousand acres of land that is usable for parks. Also there are twenty seven thousand eight hundred parcels of land in the ownership of various city agencies. One third of them are vacant. They are filled with mattresses, garbage, and other, viler castoffs. We want to turn some of them into temporary parks. Little things can add a lot.”<sup>11</sup>

unprecedented, and the fact that the three still exist as open spaces in the city, as community gardens with support by the public is a success. It is a reflection of the enormous impact that these three spaces had in the neighborhood and their acceptance by the community, especially since they were thought to be temporary spaces. However, the triumph of the permanence of these three parks is small when studied in respect to the spatial transformation that they have undergone over years. In 1965, the three projects were prototypes of new micro urban design formulas for social inclusion in deprived areas of Harlem. Their architectural elements were original, despite their limited resources. They were pilot projects and a proof that humble but well-thought and well-executed design can improve the quality of life of a neighborhood. Ironically, the Achilles heel of the three parks was their success. The option of using replaceable and non-durable materials, more wood and less concrete created more welcoming and friendly spaces, but the elements needed to be repaired and replaced very frequently. The gradual deterioration of the parks led to its abandonment and forced a necessary renewal of the spaces.

In the 90s, the parks did not have the luck of having a Committee dedicated to them, and they didn't have the creative ideas of those who drove them in 1965. Each of them for different reasons, were transformed, but there was no sensitivity by the Giuliani administration to investigate the past of these spaces. Similarly, the needs of the community had changed. This area, in the 60s, was a humble neighborhood with a high youth population, hence two of the three parks were intended for the activities of children and adolescents. However, in the late 90s, the neighborhood has gradually become a neighborhood of upper middle class with a population profile that is older with very few children which lead to the primary reason for why the spaces were converted into community gardens. These gardens at 128th street, which were spaces that attracted attention across the country during their time, are now anonymous spaces that do not remind us of the creative design of the first pocket parks that once existed in the city.

## CONCLUSIONS

During these fifty years, New York has experienced a progressive celebration of the public marked by the incidence of the most important mayoralties, with a recent accelerated investment in numerous works of public and private funding during the years of the Bloomberg administration. These large proposals allow for a diversification of uses in the city but question the basis of the true social interaction they should promote. Works such as the 128th Street parks in Harlem were able to achieve an active participation of the population as well as a critical position and visionary management of their process. The conclusions of the analysis of this case reflect on the critical role of the different agents in the management process of the work and its impact on its urban context:

- First, the administration plays a key role in channeling private interests and citizens demands. Figures like Thomas Hoving, the Commissioner of the Department of Parks and Recreation, criticized and interrupted the monotonous city policies for over forty years. His position together with others are key in generating an evolution of the quality of urban spaces.

- Second, the role of anonymous citizens and their active participation has a direct influence on the long-term survival and quality of public space. The 128th street project showed that the users are not passive with the context in which they live and they react to situations they share. Social inclusion in infrastructure design in public space is fundamental to the future of public interventions. Therefore, the link between space and the user is as important as the design in the process of the ideation of the space.

- Third, new ideas and prototypes for the design, production, development, maintenance and control of the open public spaces are essential in a society whose needs are constantly changing. The temporary nature of the parks in 128th Street showed the reality of the mutable and temporary needs of a population for contemporary and flexible public space.

- And finally, the transformation of these three small pocket parks in a nondescript design teaches us a lesson. Social inclusion in urban infrastructure makes the space alive and as such is not immutable over time. As Liz Diller questioned: "Is it right to preserve a public space as designed, even if it resists public use? Or is it better to accept that these spaces must be transformed to meet the need of changing population, at the risk of aiding and abetting cultural amnesia within the built realm?"<sup>12</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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