

Communications for the Riverside Park Community

Proposal for the Design Phase

Today Riverside Park provides a taste of Paradise for the Upper West Side, as Frederick Law Olmsted hoped it would. In Paradise, there is no division between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, professional and unprofessional, old and young. Rather, there is one community of people who appreciate nature.

Like New York City itself, the Upper West Side is divided into rich and poor, educated and uneducated, professional and unprofessional, black and white, Hispanic and non-Hispanic. These multiple divisions often require hard decisions to maintain the body politic. Hard decisions can breed resentment. Olmsted understood these difficulties and envisioned the urban park as a place free of resentment, a place where all could recapture a sense of paradise. Current efforts at park restoration carry these hopes as well.

Riverside Park is at a particularly crucial point in its development. Charles McKinney, Director of the park, has developed a long-range plan for its revitalization that is exemplary among such plans in New York City. The recently organized Riverside Park Fund is preparing to begin fund-raising for the plan's implementation. The park users continue to be among the most ethnically and economically varied of any park user group in the city. At this point, the politics of hard compromise have not spilled over into the relationships between various park users. There is no history of divisive politics as yet, and no accumulation of resentments.

This is a proposal to preclude divisive politics from accumulating as the park enters this new phase of revitalization. The premise is that the various differences between all the Riverside Park interest groups can be orchestrated to include all, not exclude some for the benefit of others. What is required is a communication system that does not exclude the validity of anyone's perception of the park and works toward consensus in decision-making. Communication establishes and sustains community. As Olmsted envisioned, one person's appreciation of the river and the riverside can enhance another's appreciation. Each person's appreciation is different, yet the communication channels in a community can organize these differences in ways that resonate with each other. Different ways of perceiving nature can be orchestrated without creating division. Paradise along the river is possible.

Proposal

This is a proposal for the design of a television communications system for the Riverside Park community. The intent of the system is twofold: 1) to create an ongoing understanding of the river and the park for park users and other interest groups that will enhance everybody's appreciation of these natural and designed treasures. 2) to provide a framework for consensus about park decision-making.

Television is the most non-exclusionary medium of public communication available. Unlike print media such as books and newspapers, television does not require formal training. Television can be used to ground our understanding of the park and the river in a mosaic of community perception. Park users do not share a textbook about the park. What they do share are

experiences of the same place. Video can be used to validate these experiences as part of a larger community experience. The intended communications system will enable the community to generate a mosaic of their perceptions that will provide a common ground for community understanding.

The design phase of the proposed communication system for the Riverside Park community will include:

1. Artistic studies of Riverside Park and the Hudson River using video.
2. A script for a video production that presents Olmsted's design vision and the views of Robert Moses and others involved in the history of the park.
3. A script for an educational videotape about the ecology of the park.
4. A script for a videotape that presents how different users appreciate the park.
5. The development of a program outline for training local youth as "video rangers" to do ongoing studies of the park and river as well as to provide regular video communication service for park users.
6. The identification of various outlets for the communication system: including schools, churches, synagogues, video stores, bars and restaurants with television, and public cable television.
5. The development of ways of using the communication system at meetings to support consensus decision-making about the park.
6. The organization of a plan of implementation.
7. The development of a financial prospectus and the determining of sources of funding.