

Phil Henshaw

From: Phil Henshaw [pfh@synapse9.com]
Sent: Sunday, April 25, 2010 10:42 AM
To: 'COTE Forum'
Subject: RE: Heather Garden redesign - a radical change

Folks,

I'm more concerned about the ongoing renovation of the historic Heather Garden, now that we see what's actually being done. What's unfolding clearly seems intended to depart from the naturalistic design of the garden, to impose a strong abstract order on it instead.

In the words of the designer hired to do it, Lynden B. Miller, "a garden is an art form using many of the same elements as painting", "a collage of disparate elements", and seeing a "need for large swaths of plants and repetition as keys to making the long perennial bed successful" ([Winter 2010 Friends or Ft Tryon Gazette](#)). What is being created is a kind of staccato rhythm of bold plantings that are as unnaturalistic as you could get. It seems sufficiently aware of the accumulative naturalistic landscape designs there before to visually disrupt them skillfully.

The key to naturalistic design is for a gardener to be an equal partner with nature in the design, taking part in how all species interweave in creating their own niches, both yielding to and adding to those inventions as design elements. It's not about superseding nature to express the will of the designer. I'm sure Lynden Miller and Jennifer Hoppa, the administrator responsible for the concept of remaking the Heather garden to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Frederick Law Olmstead's marvelous creation, think what they are doing is a good idea. The main purpose of the remake has often been said to be to be for fundraising, and to bring in lots of donations.

What a naturalistic garden really has to offer the wealthy for their support may not be yet another opportunity to celebrate an appearance that humanity is in control of nature. What a place like the Heather Garden used to expose so beautifully is how nature encourages so many kinds of interweaving but secure niches for things, that complement each other. I don't see any way that aspect of the Heather Garden's beauty can be restored but by returning control of the gardening to the gardeners, as is always was before this spring.

Mankind needs to find its own niche on earth, where we too can be secure. We also need to complement rather than disrupt the security of all other living things. There's a wonderful little book to read about that, how species create niches to have a place of security of their own, while fitting in with others. It's Paul Colinvaux's "Why Big Fierce Animals Are Rare". My one line condensed version is this. If you can dominate others, finding a secure niche requires being a little lazy and have enough other things to do, as the lion sleeps a lot and the hawk spends days just soaring. That's what we need to teach the rich, why even if you're nature's top predator, like us, security does not come from being in control.

Phil Henshaw



From: phil henshaw [mailto:pfh@synapse9.com]
Sent: Saturday, March 20, 2010 10:19 AM
To: 'COTE Forum'
Subject: Heather Garden redesign

In case you know gardeners or others who might want to know, there's a transformation taking place at the Olmstead designed Heather Garden in Ft Tryon park this week of some concern.

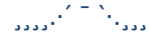
The Heather Garden is a historic masterpiece of naturalistic flower and shrub gardening, 200 yards long with various side paths, and most noted for its variety and diversity of complex interwoven successions of massing and blooms. That has given the garden six or eight peak seasons a year as generations of gardeners have worked like nature does, keeping themselves completely invisible in the design and culturing rich groupings that transform with the seasons. It always afforded endless opportunity to become absorbed by the richness and diversity of nature's beauty.

This week there are mono-culture circles and swoops of color in bold graphic design being put in, from one end of the garden to the other, in the tradition of master designers drawing attention to their own visual imagery as the purpose of a garden, providing the decorative flourishes that nature needs to "look good". It's not "Peter Max" but in that tradition. The Heather Garden never had any sort of geometric or graphic design element in it at all. It was a privately developed design by the group in the NYC parks department responsible for fundraising, that had no public presentation.

It could symbolize our general circumstance on earth too, and how continually increasing our control nature doesn't work as it naturally results in ever more things needing to be controlled. Geometric mono-culture plantings can't have complex successions coordinated with other things around them... so they just come to look frayed or have to be replaced over and over for each "show". Trying to change nature to fit our abstract images assures that at the limits of our resources we have burgeoning unsolvable problems, instead of stable new relationships that can take care of themselves.

Thought it worth mentioning.

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"the scale of change that took a century of thought 200 years ago now takes five weeks"