

# Restoring Tranquility

A proposal to improve the safety  
of Central Park's paths for everyone

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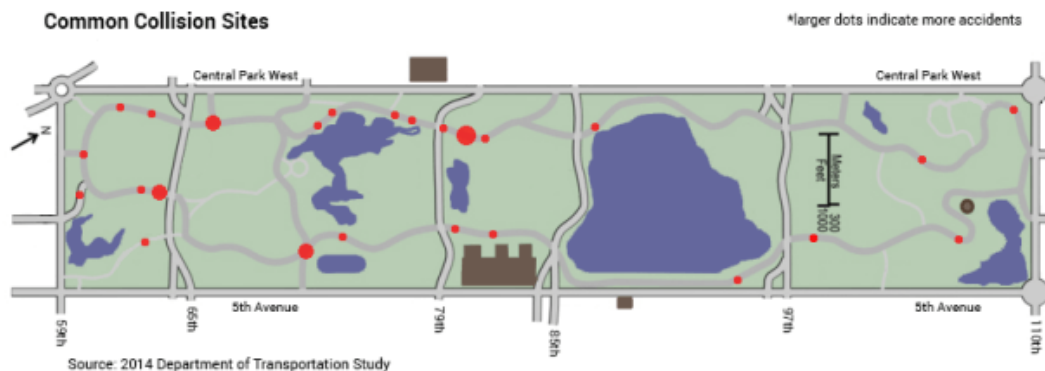
## THE CHALLENGE

Central Park is undoubtedly New York's most well-known park. Every year approximately 42 million people come to explore its verdant acres – that's up 10% from 38 million in 2011 (Central Park Conservancy). Though it's the second most frequented tourist attraction in the city, 70% of those visitors live in New York Metropolitan area (Central Park Conservancy).

Originally designed in the 1857 as an oasis from New York's frenetic urban environment, the park faces new present-day challenges due to the increased use of the space by runners, rollerbladers, horse-drawn carriages, pedicabs, bicyclists, and pedestrians. This additional traffic has taken a toll on park visitors. Collisions between bicyclists and pedestrians increased more than 25% from 2012 and 2013 (NYCDOT, 2013). There was another 45% increase (NYCDOT, 2014) in these collisions in 2014, a year that saw the death of two pedestrians: 75-year-old Irving Schachter, and 58-year-old Jill Tarlov.

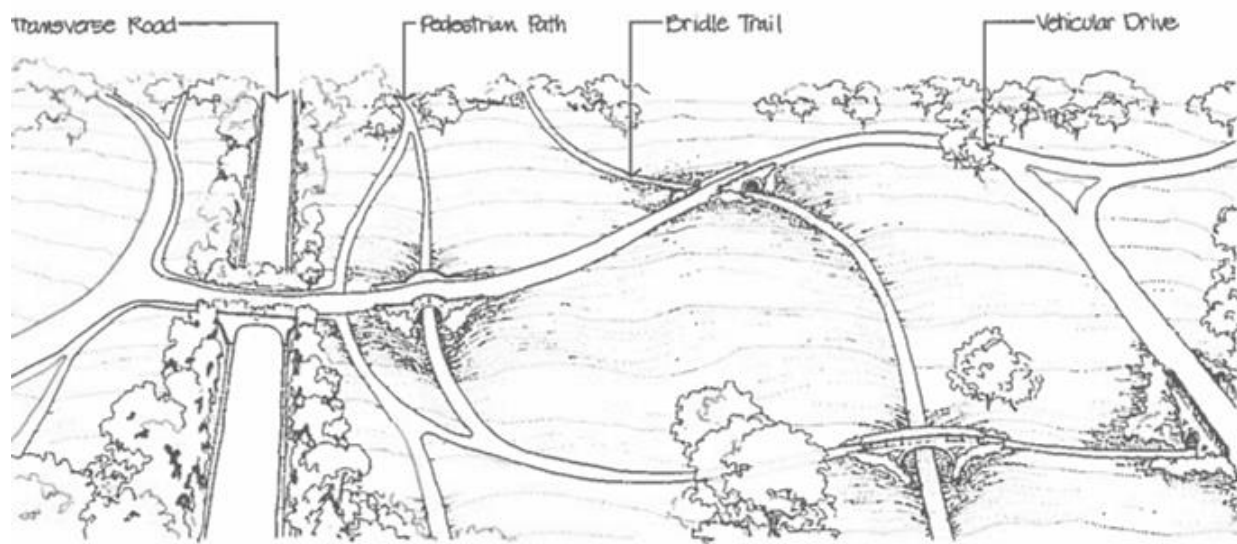
## CROSSINGS: AN UNEXPECTED CULPRIT

Lots of effort went into uncovering the cause of the deadly crashes that occurred in 2014. The city explored revising lanes on Central Park's loop. Were they contributing to collisions? The NYPD experimented with increased ticketing efforts. Local media reported anecdotal crash details: "I swerved to avoid hitting someone." These investigations may have shed light on the cause of the situation, but location statistics regarding these types of crashes tell a more complete story. 89% of fatal bike crashes in NYC occur at or within 25 feet of intersections (City of New York, 2005). An examination of bicycle and pedestrian collisions in Central Park using Department of Transportation data confirms that these collisions occur primarily at crossings.



It would also surprise most New Yorkers to know that many of the areas where they cross the Central Park loop were not intended to appear in Central Park. The park's original designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux wanted park-goers to be able to enter the park and forget about the frenetic energy of city living. They considered Manhattan's busy street crossings to be dangerous to pedestrians and aimed to create a completely revolutionary circulation plan.

“Observations of [traffic difficulties] both in our streets and in European parks, led to the planning of a system of independent ways, first for carriages, second for horsemen wishing to gallop, third for footmen, and fourth for common street traffic requiring to cross the Park. By this means it was made possible, even for the most timid and nervous, to go on foot to any district of the Park... without crossing a line of wheels on the same level, and consequently without occasion for anxiety or hesitation.” – Olmsted



The various elements of Central Park's circulation system – pedestrian paths, Bridle Trail, transverse roads and vehicular drives – are grade separated, thus preventing the interruption of the flow of one traffic mode by another.

Despite this careful planning, the park was changed significantly under the era of New York City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses who refashioned Central Park, adding amenities (among them Sheep Meadow, Tavern on the Green, The Central Park Zoo, Hecksher Ballfield, Hecksher Playground, The Great Lawn, Turtle Pond, and the Delacorte Theater) and destroying several of the park's arches. The foot traffic to these areas did not come with an elegantly planned solution that allowed pedestrians safe passage. It resulted in crudely fashioned paths that led

pedestrians right out into crowded intersections. Today, it is these crosswalks where the majority of the park's collisions occur.

## **SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS: BETTER WAYS TO USE WHAT WE HAVE**

There are several ways to improve the safety of Central Park's crossings, and some of them could make a significant impact, relatively inexpensively and easily.



### **SIGNAGE, WAYFINDING and ACCESSIBILITY**

One of the easiest ways to improve safety is to help pedestrians find attractions by directing them through existing arches. Even seasoned New Yorkers get lost in the park. Focusing on areas where people want to go and providing them with short and easy to read signs would go a long way towards a safer park. These signs should be placed for maximum visibility and should be legible to sight-impaired park-goers.

NYC and the Central Park Conservancy should also seek input from community stakeholders on updating the park's map ensuring that a comprehensive digital and print version can help Central Park's visitors find the safest route to their destination.

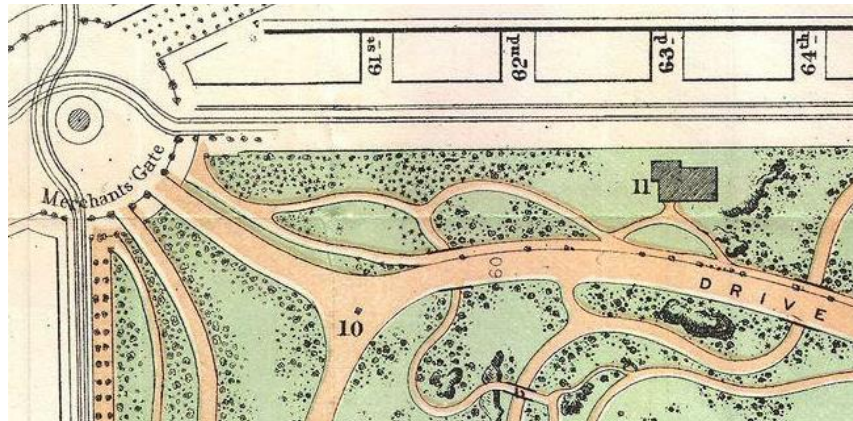
While there are several opportunities within the park to direct people through arches, two of the park's most utilized and collision-prone crosswalks are near arches. We request that particular effort be paid to facilitating usage of the following arches:

#### **Greyspot Arch**

Merchant's Gate on 59<sup>th</sup> Street in the southwest corner of the park is one of Central Park's most frequently used entrances (Central Park Conservancy, 2011). Even before the busy Columbus

Circle transit station existed, Olmsted and Vaux expected it to be heavily frequented. In response they built Greyshot Arch to allow pedestrians to quickly cross the carriage path and safely enter into the park.

When the park was built, carriages could enter and exit the park from Columbus Circle. Since that time, we've turned the former carriage road into a path that leads pedestrians out into a heavily trafficked crosswalk.



The Carriage Drive exiting the park is now a pedestrian path. The original pedestrian path located nearest to Central Park West (where Greyshot Arch exists) is now rarely used.

Signage at Columbus Circle could help pedestrians seeking Heckscher Playground or other nearby attractions to cross safely using Greyshot Arch. It would also help to designate the initial carriage path as a path for runners and cyclists rather than casual park-goers. Lanes similar to those found on the loop and signage could help to accomplish this.



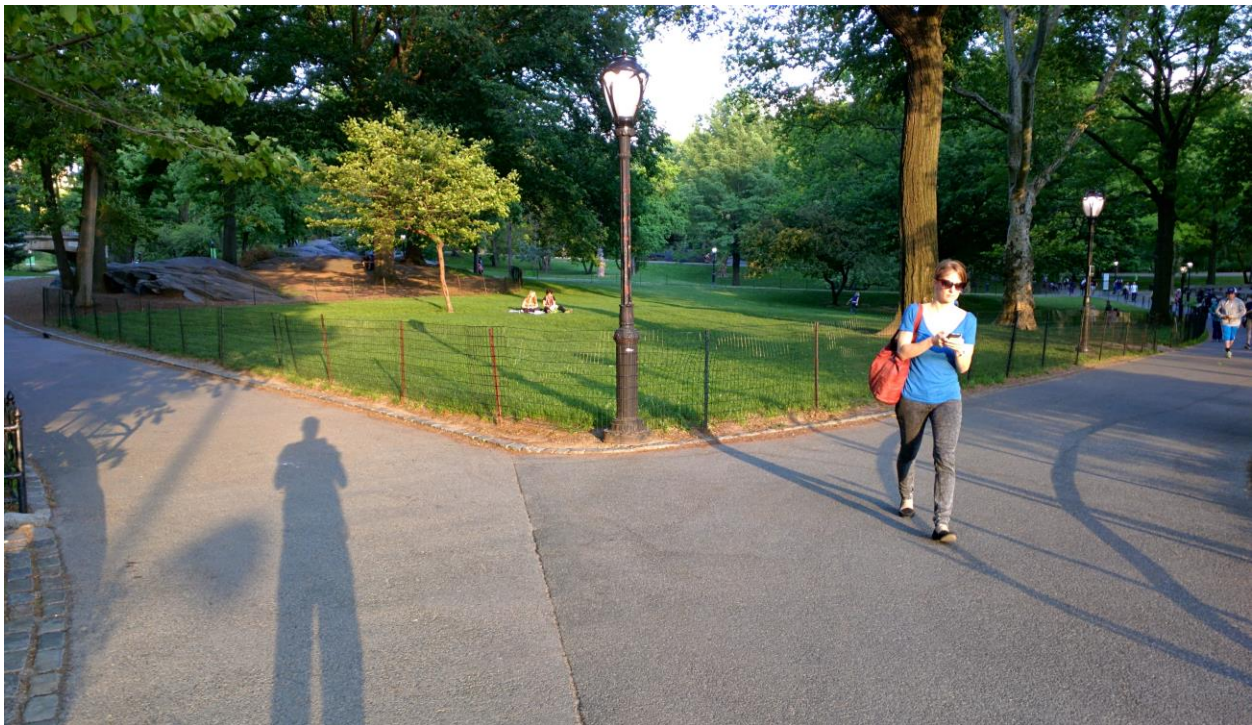
Greyshot Arch



Greyspot Arch itself would benefit from proper underside lighting and better drainage so that it doesn't flood when it rains. Darkness and puddles deter people from utilizing this arch. Proper lighting would make it a piece of architecture to be admired.

### **Winterdale Arch**

Located near the 81<sup>st</sup> Street entrance (not original to the park), this arch provides tremendous opportunity to improve circulation through in the park. It offers a safe alternative to crossing through the intersection in Central Park with the most reported collisions (DOT 2014) to popular recreational areas including The Great Lawn, and The Delacorte Theater (home to Shakespeare in the Park). Many changes in paths were made to this part of the park to allow pedestrians to easily access these new attractions which were created in the mid-twentieth century by Robert Moses.



Left leads to an arch. Right leads to a dangerous crosswalk.

Upon entering the park, visitors are faced with a decision to walk left or right. The path to the left leads to Winterdale Arch while the path to the right leads to a crosswalk that's at the base of a steep and winding hill on the Central Park loop. As the above photo shows, you can see both the arch and the crosswalk from the juncture. In an ideal world, the path to the right would not exist. In the long-term it would be advisable to restore it to grass as it was originally. In the short-term, a sign listing popular attractions should be added to this area directing

people to the arch. As with Greyspot Arch, and all the park's arches, Winterdale Arch would benefit from lighting that properly illuminates the underside of the arch.

### **Finding Other Safe Crossing Opportunities**

In locations without access to arches, wayfinding signage should be added to direct people to the safest possible crossing with pedestrian activated signals.

### **Strategic Outreach**

In implementing these changes, we are provided with a fantastic opportunity to make a positive change to the culture of how Central Park is used. Park, Conservancy and DOT personnel should be deployed to entrain new routes and usage that coincides with the unveiling of the new crossing signals.

### **Traffic Calming**

In addition to the measures noted above, crossings can be made safer with traffic calming measures that encourage bikers and motorists alike to slow down, yield, and proceed lawfully and in a way that respects pedestrian right of way. Pinch points, speed humps, high-visibility crosswalks and other standard treatments from the modern traffic calming toolbox should be applied liberally.

### **LONGER-TERM SOLUTIONS:**

Since its founding in 1980, the Central Park Conservancy has been a remarkably capable steward for Central Park. Their long-term planning has restored meadows, buildings, infrastructure, and arches throughout the park. We encourage the City and the Conservancy to consider these solutions as part of their continued work to comply with accessibility requirements, and to restore, activate, and maintain the park for all who visit it. As improvements are made to the arch approaches, this is an opportunity to modify the slopes, improve lighting, upgrade surfacing materials, add cues and guides for the visually impaired, and add railings and make other improvements to the paths that make the arches more accessible to people of varying abilities.



Green Gap Arch

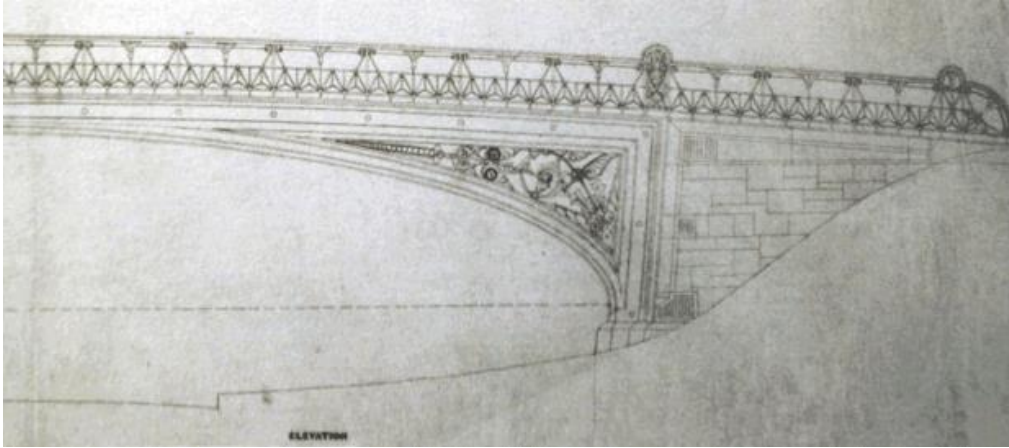
### **Green Gap Arch**

In between Wollman Rink and the Central Park Zoo, pedestrian traffic comes to a stop. Prior to the 1980s, Green Gap Arch led to the east side of the park but it was temporarily closed during the modernization of The Central Park Zoo. 36 years later it remains closed. In order to exit the park, pedestrians must climb stairs which are carved into a nearby rock outcropping. At the top of the stairs they must cross a busy two-way section of the park's main drive. Plans should be created to reactivate Green Gap Arch and allow pedestrians to continue their journey from the west side of the park to the east side of the park.

### **Outset Arch**

The 2014 crash that resulted in Jill Tarlov's death occurred on the park's main drive in between Sheep Meadow and Tavern on the Green. Originally Sheep Meadow was a grazing site for a flock of sheep and Tavern on the Green was their home, the Sheepfold. Both sites now attract huge crowds. Tavern is a major destination for tourists and locals alike and Sheep Meadow regularly sees crowds of 30,000 on a warm sunny day. As it was never expected to be so heavily visited, there is no arch in this area. It would be very possible to restore one that was demolished to make room for Robert Moses' expansion of the Central Park Zoo.





Outset Arch

Olmsted and Vaux were hired to add Outset Arch to Central Park in 1873. The arch could be recreated using drawings which exist at The Municipal Archives. The Central Park Conservancy undertook a similar recreation when it restored Oak Bridge to Central Park in 2009. The top of this arch could connect to the park's loop and allow pedestrians to safely walk under it. This type of space would create a main entrance to Sheep Meadow and give access to other main park attractions including The Mall and Bethesda Terrace. More immediately, renderings and feasibility studies would determine how this might occur.

### **Oval Arch**

Just as Sheep Meadow and Tavern on the Green, Rumsey Playfield (home to numerous concerts and movie screenings) on the east side of the park results in large crowds of people crossing the street en masse for special events. As this is a modern park addition, there is no arch here to help with crossing. It was in this part of the park that 75-year old Irving Schachter was fatally struck in 2014. This area of the park could house a recreation of Oval Arch which was demolished by Moses to make room for the expansion of the Heckscher Playground.



Oval Arch

A feasibility study and renderings should be done to determine how Oval Arch could best link pedestrians to Rumsey Playfield.

### **Marble Arch**

Undoubtedly the most ambitious plan that the City and Conservancy could undertake would be to restore an arch buried in the park. Marble Arch originally crossed under the drive between Central Park Mall (which leads to Bethesda Terrace) and Wollman Rink (as well as The Dairy), allowing pedestrians to avoid carriage traffic above. It was unnecessarily collapsed and buried in 1938, when Robert Moses revised roadways to make them friendlier to automobiles.

Journalist Clarence Cook considered it “one of the pleasantest and most elegantly built of all these [arches].” It featured a drinking fountain, a semicircular pergola, and continuous marble benches that exemplified its dual use as both an object of safety and a place of leisure, respite and quiet contemplation.

Little is known about the state of the arch and restoration might not ever be feasible, but the loss of Marble Arch is felt by all New Yorkers who learn of its fate. Knowledge of the arch can stir important conversations among New Yorkers about safety and design. It’s worthy of a commemorative sign within the park that explains its relevance. Even if it’s not feasible to restore it, Marble Arch’s story can draw attention to Central Park’s arches and entice usage.