

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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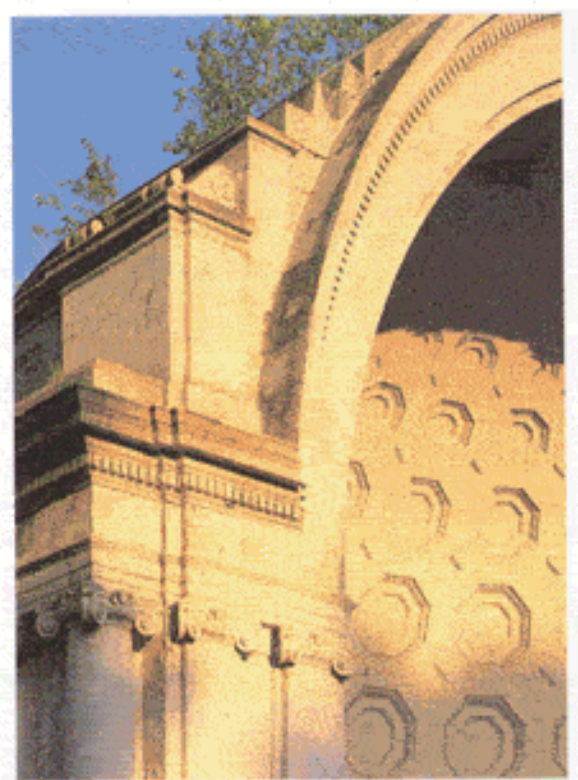
A curious structure, it

suggests a small, domed, classical temple bisected by some mischievous Roman god who then ran off with half of it. But the walls are encrusted with thick layers of peeling, dingy, gray paint that partially obscure the courses of limestone masonry. Miniature trees grow from the unrepaired mortar joints in the roof. Crude electrical-conduit tubes emerge from holes bored in the walls, and the tubes trace rude paths along the structure's outer surface. A chain-link fence spans the front of the open stage. Beneath the stage, chiseled in stone across the base, is the inscription:

SHELL GAME

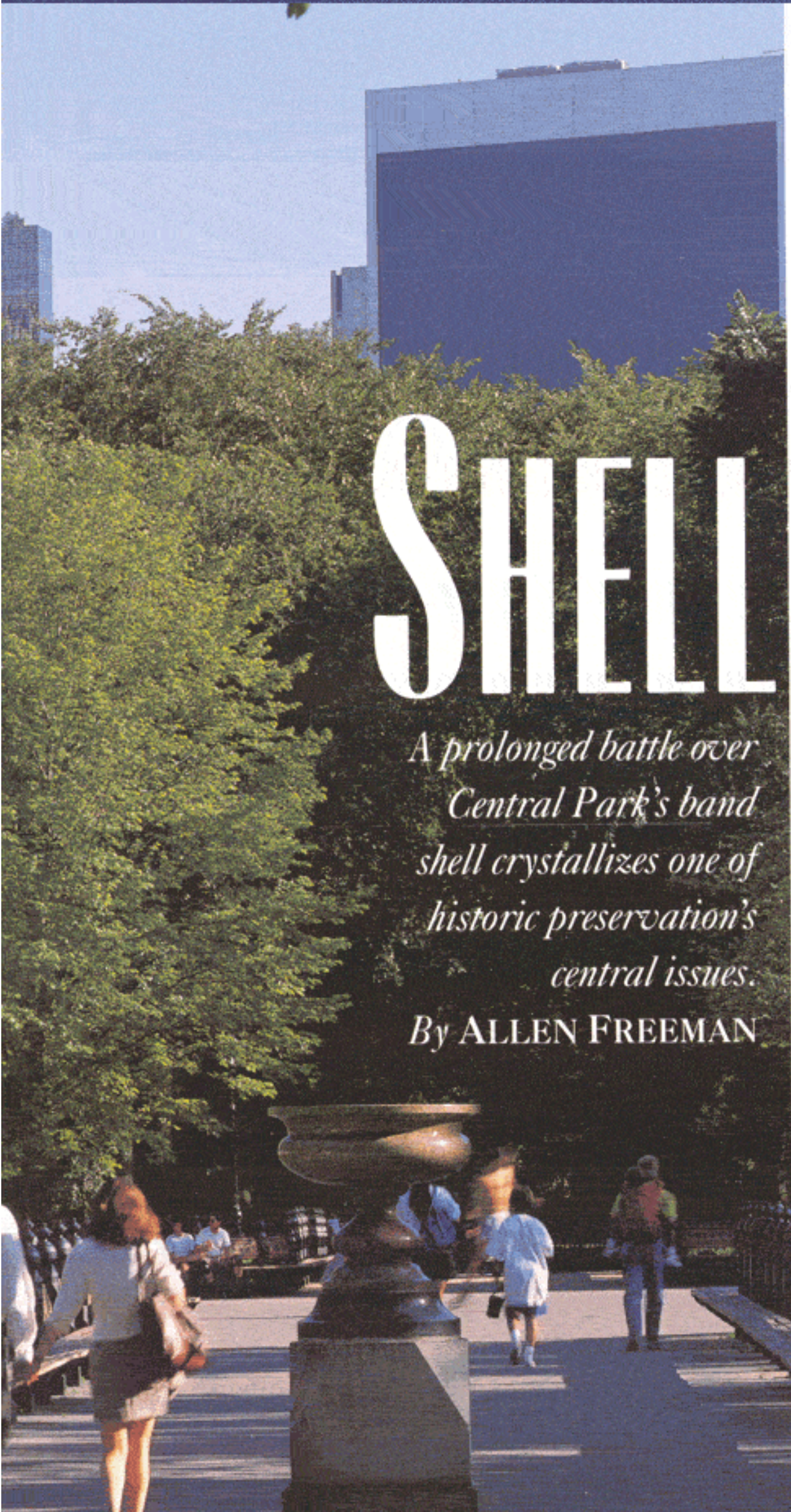
A prolonged battle over Central Park's band shell crystallizes one of historic preservation's central issues.

By ALLEN FREEMAN



Facing west, the Naumburg Band Shell rises near the southeast corner of Central Park. The 1923 Beaux-Arts acoustical stage clashed with a vision to restore the Central Park Mall to its 1873 appearance.

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY FREDERICK CHARLES



“Presented to the City of New York and Its Music Lovers. Elkan Naumburg.”

September 29 marks the seventieth anniversary of the Naumburg Band Shell dedication, but the City of New York probably will not celebrate it. The reason? For the past seven years the Central Park structure has found itself at the center of a fractious dispute that crystallizes one of historic preservation’s fundamental issues: Do we return a historic site to a moment in time or do we appreciate, retain, and perhaps restore later accretions?

The fight has pitted preservationist against preservationist, churning up disharmony among individuals and organizations that in the past have aligned with each other against common enemies. On one side stand those who want to remove the band shell in order to restore this part of Central Park to the time they perceive to be the landscape’s most pristine moment—which happens to be precisely fifty years before the band shell was constructed. The opposing side, which wants the shell to be restored, holds that it is a part of the site’s history; that it possesses cultural significance, architectural merit, and usefulness; and that the shell’s purpose—a place for the performance of music—is what the park designers intended for this location.

Breathing life into these rather dry concepts are tactics and arguments that have attracted substantial media attention in New York. The band shell’s opponents have said that the acoustic shell is obsolete in this era of amplified sound, is expensive to maintain, is a “magnet” for homeless people, and obstructs historically important vistas. The band shell’s proponents have contended the opposite. They have maintained that there is strong demand for the facility; that the city has deferred routine maintenance and has unwisely painted and mutilated a structure that requires little upkeep; that the band shell attracts homeless people no more than any other park structure and could readily be secured against them; and that it does not significantly



For fifty years the band shell was the home of concerts, top, by the Goldman Memorial Band. A reposeful painting of the shell, center, graced the cover of *The New Yorker* in 1974. A cheerful wintry tableau, above, during the Depression was one of many kinds of uses to which the band shell has been put.

obstruct any historically meaningful vista.

The conflict made its way in fits and starts through the courts, and arguments were based upon such legal points as the right of the city to accept and then destroy a gift and such procedural points as securing permission from city watchdog agencies.

Leading the fight to remove the band shell were two influential women named Elizabeth

who prefer to be called Betsy: Elizabeth Gotbaum, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, and Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, the Central Park administrator since 1979 and the president of the nonprofit Central Park Conservancy since its inception in 1980. The Conservancy, as the Parks Department’s effective partner in restoring and maintaining the 843-acre park, has become Central Park’s chief steward, and the socially well-connected Wellesley- and Yale-educated Rogers has proven to be a capable fund raiser for a highly visible nonprofit organization that, in a city of sizable corporate and private wealth, lives or dies by tax-deductible gifts. The

Conservancy provides approximately half of the park’s annual maintenance and operational budget of \$12 million and has funded \$1.5 million of a \$3.8-million restoration project of Central Park’s Mall. Endorsing the plan to remove the band shell within the context of the Mall restoration were the City of New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Municipal Art Society of New York, and the New York Art Commission.

Leading the battle to save the band shell was a newcomer to historic preservation, Christopher London. The intellectual, outspoken great-grandson of the band shell’s donor, Elkan Naumburg, London holds a doctoral degree in British Victorian architectural studies from Oriel College, Oxford. While London’s attorneys threw up legal roadblocks to demolition in New York State courts, London established the Coalition to Save the Band Shell. The Coalition, which for several months operated out of a Lexington

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Avenue storefront, collected more than 17,000 signatures on petitions, sponsored a radio advertising campaign confronting "the two Betsys," and distributed "Save the Band Shell" lapel buttons. Supporting the Coalition were four community boards that represent neighborhoods bordering Central Park, Hispanic and African-American community and preservation groups, and individuals prominent in the arts—most notably music and architecture.

The writer Tom Wolfe might portray the conflict as a contest between a segment of Manhattan's well-heeled donor establishment supporting a vision of Central Park from 135 years ago and New Yorkers who have loved the band shell and were prepared to lie down in front of bulldozers to save it. But that would caricature the fray and its protagonists. In fact both sides count affluent New Yorkers among their supporters, and both have conceded points to the opposition. Rogers, for instance, has

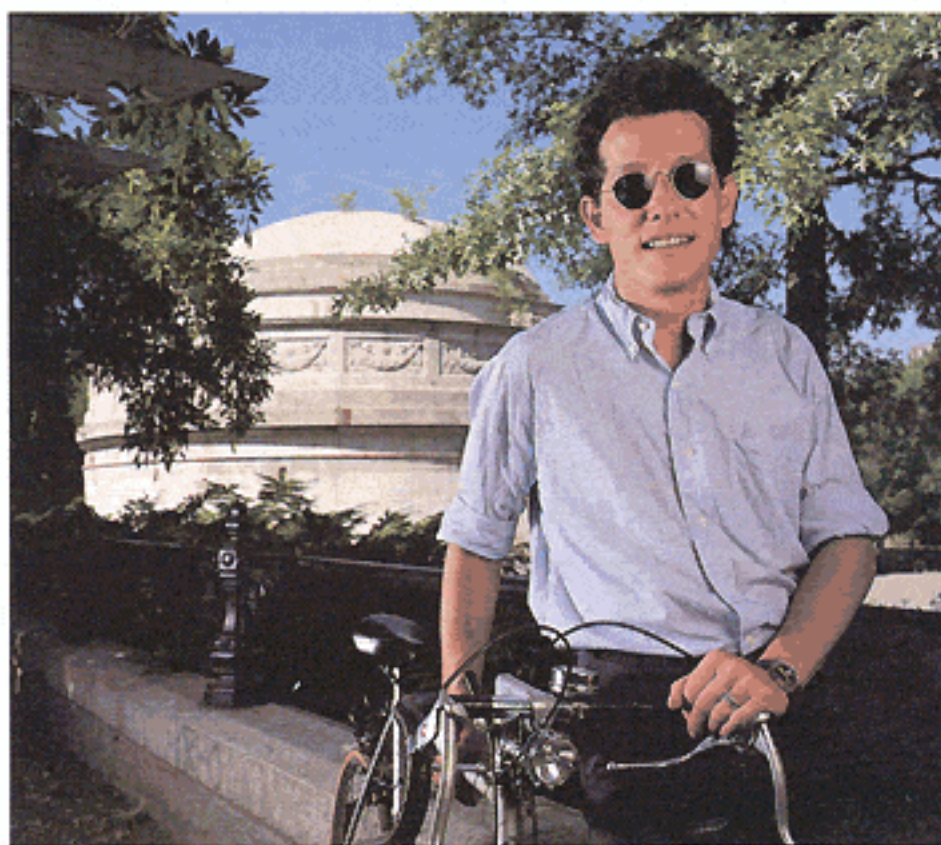
written that the shell "has been a source of great pleasure to thousands of New Yorkers," and London praises the overall effectiveness of the Conservancy in restoring the formerly neglected park.

If one ascribes but the loftiest of motives to both sides, the clash boiled down to one vision opposing another—a conflict worthy of Solomon. And certainly Solomon would want to consider the original landscape designers' scheme for this section of Central Park, the band shell's prominent location within that area, its origin and use, and its latter-day diminution of value in the park stewards' estimations.

The structure rises adjacent to the Mall, the park's only extended formal landscape feature. Central Park's designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, inserted the nearly quarter-mile-long, thirty-two-foot-wide linear promenade into their otherwise pastoral, curvilinear park design in order to draw strollers from Central Park's southeast corner at 59th Street and Fifth Avenue in-

to the heart of the southern half of the long, narrow park.

Attracting the promenaders in Olmsted and Vaux's day was the distant view of the wooded Ramble and, beyond, the stone turret of Belvedere Castle, a miniaturized Gothic fortress that stands atop a natural outcropping called Vista Rock. Quadruple rows of American elms shaded their stroll. Offering them entertainment were



Christopher London, above, is the great-grandson of the band shell's donor. Photographed beneath the Wisteria Pergola, London led the Coalition to Save the Band Shell. Decorative plaques, opposite, relieve the rear view of the band shell.

concerts performed in a Moorish, hexagonal, cast-iron bandstand situated alongside the Mall to the west. For refreshment, drinks could be purchased at a stand that was first called the Ladies Pavilion and later named the Casino, which was sited across the mall from the bandstand on a slight rise behind the Wisteria Pergola (one of this country's first imports of the flowering vine from China). Arriving at the edge of Central Park Lake, the stroller was rewarded with the park's most formally designed architectural ensemble: the Terrace Bridge Arcade beneath the carriage road at 72nd Street, the massively balustraded Terrace stairs, and the paved Esplanade upon which was centered the Bethesda Fountain graced by

Emma Stebbins's winged sculpture, *The Angel of the Waters*. If, in description, the Mall seems overprogrammed, the experience—like that of the rest of Olmsted and Vaux's brilliantly calculated park—belies that negative preconception.

The Mall's architectural features, designed by British-bred-and-trained Vaux and his fellow countryman, Jacob Wrey Mould, were constructed during the Civil

War. A very early photograph looking south from the Terrace shows an allée of immature elms bordering a promenade surfaced in gravel. It also reveals that unlike the Mall as we know it today, the walkway maintained a uniform width for its entire length, and that Mould's bandstand was surrounded by grass. If the photographer had turned and faced north, he or she would have revealed the Bethesda Fountain unadorned by Stebbins's angel, which was not put into place until 1873. That year was chosen in the 1980s as the interpretive date for the

Mall restoration that continues today.

During this century's second decade, Elkan Naumburg determined that he wanted to build a new Central Park concert stage and donate it to the city in the philanthropic spirit of some successful first- and second-generation Americans who endowed foundations, constructed monuments, and underwrote civic improvements. Naumburg, an amateur musician, had immigrated to Baltimore from Bavaria in 1850 at the age of fifteen. He moved to New York in 1866, became a successful haberdasher, and made his fortune as a commercial banker on Wall Street. Meanwhile, his family had intermarried among other prominent New York German-Jewish families, those Stephen Birmingham chronicled in his 1967 social biography, *Our Crowd*.

Beginning in 1905 Naumburg financed a continuing series of free symphony concerts in the bandstand and, dissatisfied with the unfocused sound, maintained that the properties of a (Continued on Page 91)

SHELL GAME

(Continued from Page 42) shell would remedy the bandstand's deficiencies. In 1916 Naumburg commissioned his nephew, William Gabriel Tachau, to design the shell. Tachau, a graduate of Columbia University and the École des Beaux-Arts, was an architect of synagogues, armories, college buildings, and the Aaron Naumburg apartment in New York's Hotel des Artistes—rooms that have since been dismantled and reconstructed in Harvard University's Fogg Museum. An announcement of the commencement of the band shell's long-delayed construction was made in March 1923, and within six months it was built and dedicated.

Tachau's reinforced-concrete structure, sheathed in Indiana limestone, was backed into the lower edge of the slope leading from the Wisteria Pergola, directly across the Mall from the site of Jacob Mould's bandstand. The new structure's coffered inner shell in the shape of a half-hemisphere must have reminded music lovers of the shell above Carnegie Hall's

stage. Tachau ingeniously buried within the slope two small changing rooms that are accessible through the door at the rear of the stage. He provided twin stone staircases that climb the hill while hugging the shell's outer curve, join together behind the shell, then ascend in a single flight to the level of the pergola. And he placed a row of eleven low-relief limestone plaques around the rear of the shell to relieve the limestone expanse.

The New York Times reported that 10,000 persons attended the band shell's dedication seventy years ago. Naumburg made two short speeches and turned the structure over to the acting mayor, the park commissioner, and the city chamberlain, who accepted Naumburg's gift on behalf of the city. A sixty-piece orchestra and a soprano performed works by Beethoven, Rossini, Bizet, Verdi, and Tchaikovsky, and ended their concert with a march, "On the Mall," composed and conducted by Edwin Franko Goldman and dedicated to Naumburg.

The following year, 1924, Naumburg died at the age of eighty-nine, but the

Naumburg Concerts were continued in the band shell, underwritten by Elkan's sons, Walter and George, and following their deaths by an endowment in Walter's will. (Naumburg also left a foundation that annually sponsors the Naumburg Award for young musicians.) A 1980 list of musical artists who had performed in the Naumburg concert series during the preceding seventy-five years included conductors Max Rudolf, Robert Shaw, Julius Rudel, and Joseph Silverstein; vocalists Judith Raskin, Robert Rounsville, and William Warfield; and jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman.

Although a complete record of the band shell's users apparently does not exist, such a list would include dance bands, glee clubs, barbershop quartets, politicians, orators, and magicians. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke there, Leonard Bernstein conducted there, the Grateful Dead performed there, and John Lennon's fans held a candlelight vigil there the evening that the former Beatle was murdered. For its first fifty years the

shell was most popularly associated with the fifty-four-member Goldman Memorial Band—organized and long conducted by Edwin Goldman—through that ensemble's free concerts of classical, operatic, and Broadway music, as well as marches. E.B. White captured the flavor of those concerts in his 1949 *Here Is New York*: "Another hot night I stop off at the Goldman Band concert in the Mall in Central Park. The people seated on the benches fanned out in front of the band shell are attentive, appreciative.... On the bench directly in front of me, a boy sits with his arm around the girl; they are proud of each other and are swathed in music...."

In 1970, for reasons unrelated to the shell, the band, then under the sponsorship of the Guggenheim family, moved its outdoor concerts to the new Guggenheim Band Shell in Damrosch Park at Lincoln Center. Today the band's board, musicians, and staff enthusiastically support the preservation of their former longtime Central Park home. "The Band would love to return to the Naumburg Band Shell's dignified setting and unmatched acoustics," says the organization's president, Harry Weintraub.

The idea that the band shell should be removed from the Mall for reasons of historical authenticity gained acceptance in tandem with the notion that all musical performances must be loudly amplified. Henry Hope Reed, a Central Park curator, wrote in 1967 that "the pleasure of viewing the crowded Mall" from the pergola had been lost with the construction of the band shell. A decade later, before her appointment as Central Park administrator, Rogers coauthored *The Central Park Book* in which she characterized the shell as a "sore thumb." An "Outline for a Restoration Plan," copublished in the early 1980s by the Parks Department and the Central Park Conservancy, suggested that the band shell be removed, calling for "restoration of the Mall to its original configuration" and provision of space at the Rumsey Playground (the site of the Casino, which was torn down in the 1930s) "for the many popular events now taking place at the band shell."

In 1985 the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, after what seemed to one observer an endless discussion, explicitly approved the removal of the band shell as part of the Mall's restoration, and the following year Rogers and four landscape architects listed justifications in "Rebuilding Central Park: A Management and Restoration Plan": "The band shell, which has blocked the view of the Wisteria Per-

gola for [more than] sixty years, has outlived its usefulness as a performance stage. Performers today use electronic sound systems, and the band shell's acoustics are therefore redundant. If the band shell were removed, events requiring a stage could take place in a newly designed music pavilion at the location of the original octagonal [sic] Victorian structure. Modern sound systems and an expandable stage area could be built into this concert structure. In addition, if the Wisteria Pergola were no longer hidden behind the band shell, it would not be able to serve, as it now does (in spite of police surveillance), as a market for furtive drug dealing."

With that statement the Conservancy began its seven-year effort to raze the band shell as part of the \$3.8-million Mall restoration. That effort was furthered in October 1991, when Laurie Beckelman, the chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, reiterated her agency's 1985 approval. "Please feel free to proceed with removal of the band shell without further review by this agency, except, of course, for the design of the restoration of its site," Beckelman wrote to Rogers. The Landmarks Commission functions merely as an advisor to other city agencies, but three months later, in January 1992, the city's Art Commission, which has the final say over city-owned properties, approved the demolition.

The New York Times endorsed demolition in its editorial pages and dutifully reported the progress of the story; *The New York Observer*, a weekly, published relatively long, well-researched news articles and strong editorials in support of the shell. A local television station produced two hurried live interviews shot in front of the band shell that pitted Christopher London against Parks Commissioner Betsy Gotbaum. City officials entertained a proposal by Peekskill, New York, to take the band shell off their hands, but a court ruling prohibited the move. Meanwhile London's Coalition contended that disassembly, moving, and reassembly were impossible. This spring Gotbaum wrote to the *Observer* saying "not a single individual from [the band shell's] apparent myriad friends has come forward to offer any cash toward restoration." London, who had commissioned an engineering study that estimated the cost of restoration to range between \$236,000 and \$308,000, countered that those costs were minor in the context of the \$3.8-million Mall restoration.

In May the Parks Department removed construction barricades on the Mall. For the first time since 1923, when Mould's

bandstand and Vaux's elm islands were removed and the band shell was constructed, the area within a projected radius of the band shell approximates the look of the 1870s. Continuous fixed benches, constructed of slatted wood seats and metal stanchions, encircle islands of greenery, and the Wisteria Pergola, restored several years ago, is once again well-kept and inviting.

And then the fight abruptly died. On July 8 the New York State Court of Appeals refused to hear an appeal by the Parks Department and the Conservancy. In reaction, Betsy Gotbaum echoed Betsy Rogers's "sore-thumb" comment and said the Parks Department would try to "work around" the band shell. For his part London said the Coalition would help raise funds to restore the shell.

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In an attempt to gather informed perspectives on the central preservation issue, scholars not directly connected with the conflict were asked for their comments. James Marston Fitch, the octogenarian author, editor, scholar, critic, and architectural historian, balances what he calls "constant change in [Central Park's] landscape from both natural and human intervention since the day it was begun" with "very clear images—both intellectual and photographic—of what Olmsted had in mind when he finished the park." Nothing should be done that doesn't bear in mind that fundamental frame of reference, he says. "But against that you have the fact that many changes have been made in the park that today we would have to regard as benign, changes that Olmsted could not have anticipated."

Fitch, who in the 1970s was the first person to hold the title of Central Park curator, compares the notion of removing the band shell with a process that museum curators delicately call the "deaccessioning" of collections. "That is a notoriously painful and dangerous activity," he continues, "and I am afraid that is what we face here. I think most arguments that have been used for getting rid of the band

shell have been by people who don't like it, people who say it is not artistic, that it is ugly—all sorts of subjective reasons for disliking it. That is a perfectly valid position to take, but if museums eliminated what curators disliked, eventually there would not be any museums left in the country. So we just should not proceed on that kind of criteria."

In comparing Central Park's Mall to the restoration of Williamsburg, Fitch prefaces his comment with, "It is very fashionable to beat up on Williamsburg, now"—more than sixty years after the decision was made to attempt what Fitch calls a "Simon-pure restoration. There is no question about the levels of competence in the work undertaken by Colonial Williamsburg. But what has resulted, of course, is a cityscape that never was—a beautiful picture, but very deceptive."

And how would the lessons of Williamsburg apply to Central Park? "I think Williamsburg should teach us that you should not remove the band shell just because it was not put there by Olmsted. That is not an adequate reason."

Abbott Lowell Cummings, a former director of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and a retired Yale University professor of American decorative arts, considers restoration to a single moment in time artificial. "Most of the things we are involved with in historic preservation are, in a sense, living organisms, and the organic change that takes place is purely defensible.... Philosophically, I would align myself with those who view the band shell as a valid part of the life of New York and the evolving character of Central Park."

Vincent Scully, the recently retired Yale University professor of art history and a National Trust trustee, says that he is "very suspicious" of trying to confine buildings or landscapes to a single time. "The classic example was in the nineteenth century—especially in England—when so many insisted upon taking churches way, way back to a very early Gothic and destroyed a lot of very fine Perpendicular [Gothic buildings] and fine Renaissance buildings too."

Landscapes, to Scully, are like cities. "In many ways we could have wished that the tip of Manhattan was finished before they let the [Modernist, flat-topped] Chase Manhattan Bank be built, and had let nothing be built thereafter. It would have been wonderful." Then he asks, "When are cities finished?"

One could as easily apply that question to Central Park. ▼