

Morningside Park

Scenic Landmark

West 110th-123rd Streets between Morningside Drive and Morningside Avenue

Designation Date: July 15, 2008



Morningside Park. Photo by Lorraine Colbert

Morningside Park is a significant park in New York City, by the renowned landscape designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, whose work also included Central Park, Prospect Park, and Riverside Park and Drive. Originally, the site was a rugged rocky ledge separating Morningside Heights from the Harlem Plain, and because of the terrain, Andrew Haswell Green in 1867 proposed that it be excluded from the Commissioner's Plan street grid. Olmsted and Vaux, through their preliminary plan (1873) and later revised plan (1887), transformed the long, narrow, and rather difficult and unusual site into a picturesque park by respecting and enhancing its inherent beauties and possibilities, including the views both eastward and westward, and creating areas of varying character.

Important features of Morningside Park include the massive, buttressed, masonry retaining wall with parapet; overlook bays; entrance stairways (constructed 1883-92, under the plans and supervision of architects Jacob Wrey Mould, Julius Munckwitz, and Vaux, and engineer Montgomery A. Kellogg); natural rock outcroppings; carefully "designed" rockwork and plantings; curvilinear walk system; and small open meadows along the southern and eastern sides. The initial construction of the park lasted until 1895. Samuel B. Parsons Jr., a partner of Vaux's and the Superintendent of Parks, called the park "perhaps [Vaux's] most consummate piece of art that he ever created."

A number of important institutions selected locations facing the park along Morningside Drive on the Heights: the Cathedral of St. John the Divine (planned 1887; built from 1892 on); St. Luke's Hospital (1893-1928); and Columbia University (1894 on). Three notable works of sculpture were placed within the Scenic Landmark: Lafayette and Washington (1890, Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi; dedicated 1900), Carl Schurz Monument (1909-13, Karl Bitter and Henry Bacon), and Bear and Faun (Seligman) Fountain (c. 1910, Edgar M. Walter; donated 1914).

The 20th century history of the park was characterized by threats to its integrity, as well as issues of its maintenance and condition. As early as 1909, when a stadium was proposed, and 1916, when the Board of Water Supply attempted to construct a Catskill Aqueduct pumping station, a citywide debate emerged about intrusions within the park. During the Robert Moses park era, playgrounds were inserted along the park's eastern side between 1935 and 1956. A controversial proposal (1960-69) by Columbia University to construct a gymnasium in the park was halted by community opposition and a student strike, though substantial damage to the park was inflicted by blasting on the site. The Board of Education took the northwest corner of the park for a new Public School 36 building (1965-66).

Since 1987, the City's Parks Department has conducted a number of park renovation projects and built several new playgrounds. Despite modifications to its original design, over the years, Morningside Park, with its unique site and views, prominent retaining wall and high rock outcroppings, and varied character and topography, remains one of the nationally significant landscape works by America's most renowned landscape designers.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)