Meridian Hill Park: The making of an American Neoclassical Landscape

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From public parks to private residences, the most dominant style in landscape architecture at the turn of the last century was neoclassical. Spurred by the architecture and landscape architecture at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the desire for neoclassical design in cities and towns developed into the City Beautiful Movement. This design movement was so strong that it dominated the form and design of public parks for most of the first half of the twentieth century.¹

Although neoclassical design borrowed liberally from its European precedents—Italian Renaissance, Baroque, and French Formal styles—an in-depth analysis of Meridian Hill Park in Washington, D.C., provides an understanding of the development of a uniquely American style of formal landscape design. Personal photograph collections and design sketches made during two trips to Italian Renaissance and French Formal gardens by the park's designers reveal the key European influences at Meridian Hill Park.² Rather than copying the great European gardens, Meridian Hill Park reinterprets them in the context of American technology and culture in the early twentieth century. Examination of the influences of the park's designers and administrators during the twenty-six years of its development illuminates the continuum of the park's creation and provides significant insights into the changing design paradigm of the time.

Meridian Hill Park is considered the most ambitious neoclassical public park ever conceived in the United States.³ Located approximately one and one-half miles north of the White House, it is one of Washington's most significant public parks. Bounded on the west by Sixteenth Street, on the east by Fifteenth Street, on the south by W Street, and on the north by Euclid, the park is located in an ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood considered only marginally safe a decade ago. Since then a partnership between the National Park Service and the Friends of Meridian Hill has improved the park's safety and returned its use to the neighborhood residents. The park was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1994 as "an outstanding accomplishment of early 20th-century Neoclassicist park design in the United States."⁴ Originally envisioned as "a classical villa landscape at the center of a vibrant and interesting residential neighborhood," the park continues to play an important role in the area's physical and social landscape.⁵ The document prepared at the time of the Landmark designation states:

The scope and ambition of Meridian Hill Park set it apart; the idea of creating a Renaissance villa landscape in the middle of an American city to serve as a public park and cultural institution has no parallel. The park is perhaps the most ambitious and successful example of Neoclassical park design in the United States, and it is an example of extremely high artistic merit of the adaptation of Renaissance and Baroque landscape design principles to the municipal park. The breadth of its ambition, its remarkable integrity, and the masterful sureness of its design and construction single it out for recognition.⁶
Fig. 1. The plan for Meridian Hill Park prepared by George Burnap in 1914. Note the architectonic quality of the tree and shrub plantings, and the Renaissance-inspired central cascade. Burnap, Parks: Their Design, Equipment, and Use, 1916.

Owned by the United States Government and maintained by the National Park Service since 1933, Meridian Hill Park was developed with federal funds and was heavily influenced by Congressional directives. The first of these was the establishment of the McMillan Commission in 1901, whose recommendations led to the acquisition of the site as a key parcel of public space and a return to the formality of the original 1791 L'Enfant plan for the city. The second directive was the establishment of the Commission of Fine Arts, a group of nationally respected designers charged with the review of renovation and new construction in the capital, including the expanding public park system.

Analysis of Meridian Hill Park illuminates the American ideals of landscape design and the integration of architecture and nature that developed during the first part of the twentieth century. The park was designed and constructed between 1910 and 1936 under the direction of several noted architects and landscape architects. These included George Burnap, former professor at Cornell and landscape architect for the Department of Public Buildings and Grounds in Washington, D.C., between 1912 and 1917; Horace W. Peaslee, originally a student of Burnap's at Cornell who succeeded him at Public Buildings and Grounds and served as the designer of Meridian Hill Park in 1917; Ferruccio Vitale, the renowned New York landscape architect; and Irving Paine, landscape architect at Public Buildings and Grounds beginning in 1918 and the National Park Service after 1933. Although design changes continued until construction was completed in 1936, the park retained the spirit of the original design concept prepared by Burnap in 1914. However, Horace Peaslee had the longest and most
active tenure with the park, during which time he developed most of the design details and refinements for the overall plan that still exists today.

The site of the park lent itself well to a formal neoclassical design treatment. The northernmost half of the site was largely flat, and at approximately the mid-point, it sloped dramatically to the south, providing a natural setting for a Renaissance-inspired water feature. Burnap's 1914 plan (Figure 1) features an upper area of Baroque and French Formal influence, which is barely visible in this perspective view. This area included a fountain within a formal garden, drives for open carriages, a parking area, and a concert pavilion. Trees lined the sides of the drives and the circular parking area and paths meandered through informal gardens on both the east and west sides of the drives. From the parking area, steps led on all sides to a formal garden, intersected by two parallel paths running north-south along the main axis of the park. These paths, in turn, connected to a formal octagonal concert garden, with surrounding plantings divided into eight equal sections arranged around a central fountain. To the west of the concert garden, a straight, tree-lined allée connected a northern Sixteenth Street entrance with the Great Terrace (or grand terrace as indicated on the plan) and what was then proposed as the main entrance. The Great Terrace, which separated the upper and lower sections of the park, provided expansive views of the lower park and downtown Washington.

On Burnap's plan and clearly visible in the perspective were sloping, hillside gardens reminiscent of Italian boscos that combined plantings and water features. Central to these lower gardens was a series of eight descending water basins that formed a cascade. The cascade followed the main axis of the park, with a foot bridge midway that connected the two sections of the lower gardens. Paths subdivided the lower gardens into four boscos that were planted with groves of trees in a naturalistic style, rather than in the requisite grid of the Italian Renaissance. The groves had a series of meandering paths that contrasted with the straight, direct paths framing the hillside. A level plaza south of the hillside gardens anchored the lower park. At the center of this lower plaza, a rectangular reflecting pool was flanked on the east and west by square fountains, and on the south side, there was a reflecting pool on axis with the cascade. This area was set aside for a memorial to President James Buchanan. Stairs on either side of the statue niche connected the lower park directly to W Street.

Fig. 2. Plan of Meridian Hill Park as it was executed in 1916. Courtesy Land Ethics, Inc.
It is in the final park plan (Figure 2) that the influences of numerous designers, the Fine Arts Commission, and changing aesthetics were felt. Changes to the proposed 1914 plan consisted largely of design simplifications, which mirrored the trend away from the ostentatious Beaux Arts details to cleaner, more classically inspired lines. The simplification of the park’s design resulted in an overall improvement in the cohesiveness and legibility of the spatial forms. The upper area, for example, was streamlined from a mix of carriage drives, lawn, parking areas, fountain, boscos, and concert groves to a wide open lawn with converging pedestrian paths leading to the Great Terrace. This convergence created a false perspective, increasing the apparent length of the park. The concert groves and paths on either side of this lawn, an allusion to the French Formal lapis vert, were retained from the 1914 plan, as were the pleached Linden allée at the Sixteenth Street entrance and the plantings of the Great Terrace.

In the lower section of the park, the boscos on either side of the cascades were also simplified by the removal of internal paths and features and the addition of a prominent entrance at Sixteenth Street. However, it is the design of the long axes that distinguishes Meridian Hill Park from its Italian Renaissance and French Formal precedents. In American neoclassical design, the long views through the site and along each axis are invariably terminated with a major feature, but in classical Renaissance design the primary axes focused on distant views, while the secondary axes were sometimes terminated. In French Formal gardens, such as at Vaux-le-Vicomte, the long axes and major cross-axes extended virtually to infinity.
Burnap and Peaslee made two excursions to Europe to study the historical gardens and parks that were the inspiration for Meridian Hill Park, the first in 1914 with other members of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds and the Commission of Fine Arts, and the second by Peaslee alone in 1929 to study the design and construction of water features in Paris and at Vaux le Vicomte. It is clear that the park’s design did not merely reflect the impressions gained from these trips, since its overall form was determined well in advance of the initial excursion. The trips instead provided an opportunity to study European models on the ground and to refine the details and implementation of the park’s design. Although the specific itineraries of these trips are unknown, there are references to the Pincian Hill in Rome, Boboli Gardens in Florence, the Villa Lante in Bagnaia (Figure 3), and Villa d’Este in Tivoli in the sketches, photographs, and writings of Horace Peaslee. The design motifs from these gardens were used merely as guides, to be expressed in the form and details that are unique to Meridian Hill Park. The design vocabulary of Italian Renaissance villa landscapes—cascades, boscos, the interplay of light and water, the contrast of monumental and intimate spaces, niches, railings, balustrades, and urns—is repeated at Meridian Hill Park, but often in altered form, placement, and execution.

A prime example of this adaptation of design precedents can be seen in the trial sketches that Peaslee completed for the Sixteenth Street entrance. One, labeled the Boboli motif (Figure 4), replicates a section of wall at the Boboli Gardens. Although the final design for the entrance and its sister niche as they appear today incorporate the crowning balustrade, symmetry, columns, and rustication of the original, there are significant differences (Figure 5). The scale has been altered to address the constraints of the site and as seen in the construction of the site as a whole, the masonry wall has been built of exposed aggregate concrete to mimic Renaissance stone work. Exposed aggregate concrete, which is formed by adding a mix of small pebbles to a concrete matrix, results in a pebbled surface which can vary in color and texture depending on the type of pebbles, or aggregate, used in the mix.

This use of concrete construction represents a significant divergence from classical antecedents and allows a cost-effective method for creating architectural features in the park. In fact, the construction of Meridian Hill Park marked an important development in the use of concrete for ornamental purposes. Initially formulated by contractor John Earley, exposed aggregate was used for constructing walls, benches, urns, and walkways in the park, which became one of the best and earliest examples of this method of construction in this country.
The terraces, stairs, walls and pavements—almost all the structural elements in this highly structured landscape—were rendered in precast and cast-in-place concrete, treated in a variety of ways to expose the different aggregates used in the mixes. . . . Details were formed with sensitivity and precision through a series of technical innovations in casting and finishing. Varied colors and sizes of the exposed aggregates artfully recalled the patterns and textures of the decorative mosaic and tile work of the Renaissance masons. The articulation of the formal historical models of the park in this advanced construction technology created a striking juxtaposition that lent a unique appearance and character to the park.\footnote{7}

Apart from the use of exposed aggregate to simulate rusticated stone work in the architectural details, Peaslee adopted the idea of ground-plane patterning common in Baroque and Renaissance gardens, but implemented it in another medium. In Baroque gardens, such as Villa Garzoni at Collodi and Villa Gamberaia at Settignano, pebble mosaics were used to create striking patterns (Figure 6). These patterns had both decorative and functional uses. In large gardens the varying pavement patterns provided a sense of orientation, direction, and identification to the user. Peaslee adopted a similar approach by using various sizes and colors of aggregate in the concrete mixes for the pavement and by varying the location of these mixes. The patterns changed based on the location and use of the particular area of the park and were geometrical in form, such as the Art Deco style in the area of the central cascades (Figure 7). Among the most decorative are the patterns at the Sixteenth Street entrance that mimic a Baroque star at the Boboli Gardens.

The Commission of Fine Arts had a grand vision for the park:

The scheme for development of this park is based upon the idea of having in the Capitol [sic] of the United States one display garden which shall be comparable to the great public gardens of Rome, Paris and other national capitals—a landscape work which shall set a high standard in design and execution for other American cities.\footnote{8}

To achieve that vision, it was fundamental that the architectural and horticultural elements work together to reinforce the park’s spatial design and character. It is clear from Burnap’s aerial perspective that he intended the plantings to be architectonic in form, such as tree masses and hedges that were designed to be pleached and sheared into wall-like masses to define the edges of the “outdoor rooms.” The hard-surfaced architectural elements blended with the softer vegetative features to define the spatial forms and directions of the park. Burnap’s architectonic view of the landscape was not entirely implemented in planting or in long-term maintenance; however, the softening of the landscape over time was foreseen by the Commission of Fine Arts:
hedges, notably those lining the cascades, are still original to the site, the majority have been lost to natural attrition or removed due to concerns for visitor safety (Figure 8).

The major difference between Renaissance and French Formal styles of planting that Burnap and Peaslee emulated from their visits to the European gardens lies in the lack of parterre plantings at Meridian Hill Park. Parterres were a standard feature of these gardens, and those at the Villa Lante, for instance, were in existence and being maintained at the time of Peaslee's visit. There are no images of the gardens at Vaux-le-Vicomte from his visit—instead he focused on photographing the gates. Vitale, Peaslee, and later Irving Paine focused on the outline that the Italian cypresses created in the sky and the boscos, with their requisite surrounding hedges, as the embodiment of the Renaissance spirit of garden design. There was clearly a change in use of the boscos, from a decorative feature that lined strolling paths to an area for lounging and picnicking. Vitale prescribed lawn in the original planting plan, but by the mid 1930s, Payne had substituted English ivy, possibly to discourage loungers. Ironically, after the ivy was planted, it was replaced almost immediately by lawn, providing a popular location for park visitors today.

After working with Washington's Department of Public Buildings and Grounds and designing Meridian Hill Park, Burnap published Parks: Their Design, Equipment and Use, the first comprehensive American book on the subject. Even though it is now considered outdated, it filled a niche in public park design literature. Based on Burnap's book and the writings of others, neoclassical design became the standard for American parks, although there were significant differences between villa landscapes and public parks in the United States. Perhaps the most significant difference between the European models and American parks was the economic factor. Public parks, such as Meridian Hill Park, did not have unlimited funds, and the park planners had to struggle constantly for adequate funding. Constructing hard surfaces with exposed aggregate proved economical, but the plants rarely were sheared and pleached into the formal, archi-
tectonic forms envisioned by designers and prescribed by Renaissance dictates. Since access to public parks is of necessity democratic, their design required modifications in the forms of open spaces, such as lawns and boscos, as well as management of the constant friction between active recreational use and the constraints of a controlled landscape.

The forms and detailing of Meridian Hill Park also subtly changed the Renaissance mold. The high level of use in a public park and the need for security dictated a need for simplicity in form, mirroring the change in design aesthetics of the 1920s and 1930s. Axes were invariably terminated with a major feature, dictated in part by the constraints of the surrounding urban landscape. Finally, ubiquitous Renaissance features such as the parterre were replaced by more accessible grassy hillsides. While features such as the cascade, balustrades, and urns were inspired by the Renaissance, the final, neoclassical design of Meridian Hill Park was an American adaptation, rather than a replica of a Renaissance prototype.

Notes
2. Horace Peaslee’s photographs, made during two trips to Europe on behalf of the Department of Public Buildings and Grounds in Washington, are housed in the American Institute of Architects Library, Washington, D.C. Peaslee’s sketches and plans are housed in the National Park Service Collection (Record Group 79), National Archives, Washington, D.C.
4. Ibid., 12.
7. Ibid.
10. The structure of the hedges can be seen in a series of photographs dated to June 1952, 3 July 1952, and 1944, National Park Service, Rock Creek Headquarters, National Capital Region.
11. Peaslee Photograph collection, American Institute of Architects Library.