PROPOSED PLAN FOR MADISON SQUARE, NEW YORK CITY.

... SIXTY years ago few buildings, except rural ones, stood north of Union Square, and the area now called Madison Square was an open tract some ten acres in extent in the centre of which stood a House of Refuge for unruly boys—an altogether neglected and unsightly tract, of which the only useful feature was a little pond used for skating in the winter. When the House of Refuge burned in 1839, efforts were made to improve the place, but nothing substantial was accomplished until the mayoralty of James Harper, between the years 1844 and 1847. This was some ten years before Central Park was thought of, and although Downing had already done some of his best work, he had not yet laid out those urban squares in Washington which first showed American eyes what might be accomplished in this direction.

When studied on paper the plan of Madison Square shows the working of design, not of accident; yet its treatment is so petty and monotonous, so
wanting alike in broad unity, in effective variety and in conspicuous points of interest, that, we believe, few New Yorkers realize that it has any plan at all... The one virtue of the design is that those who wish to cross the park diagonally may do so with reasonable directness. And its chief defect is that its many minor paths cut up its lawns so pitilessly that the eye nowhere rests upon a quiet, reposeful stretch of green.

Truly naturalistic schemes of park design are, of course, more difficult to manage well on a small than on a large scale; and they are not as appropriate as others when the architectural surroundings of the pleasure-ground are of an obtrusively urban sort. Therefore, Messrs. Bell & Langton have sensibly conceived their rearrangement of Madison Square upon semi-formal lines. It may appear that in drawing their main paths anew they have made diagonal circulation less direct; but measurements show that, if anything, they have shortened the diagonal courses. By suppressing the minor paths they have won space for wide lawns. Yet the accommodation for strollers and for playing children, and for rows of seats as well, which is lost in this way, is more than made good by the broad mall which forms the central feature of their design, the two parallel paths which lie beyond its flanking flower-beds, and the large open circles which surround the basin that now exists, and the one which they indicate as balancing it toward the north...

[The plan] is published here less with the idea that Madison Square may actually be renovated according to its indications than in the belief that a comparison of it with the existing state of the Square will be instructive to those charged with the arrangement of new small parks in this and other cities... As a rule, a formal or semi-formal manner of treatment, resulting in a pleasure-ground which is properly to be called a large garden rather than a park, must be most appropriate for restricted areas in the heart of a great city. And Messrs. Bell & Langton show that such a manner of treatment need not exclude variety in design, abundance of shade, the reposeful effect of wide green lawns, or even such seemingly unstudied, yet artistic, arrangements of trees, shrubs and grass as may produce pleasingly naturalistic impressions and illusions.

New York City. M. G. Van Rensselaer

[Garden and Forest 9 (1896): 143]

CORRESPONDENCE.

THE PLANS OF MADISON SQUARE.

To the Editor of Garden and Forest:

Sir,—All persons interested in park-making will certainly be grateful for the two plans of Madison Square in your last issue and the study of their comparative merits by Mrs. Van Rensselaer. Perhaps still further discussion may be helpful, and I therefore write to say that it is hardly correct to classify the old plan as belonging to the naturalistic class. I draw a heavy line (see fig. 22) to show how symmetrical it is except where it has been
distorted in two or three places. Curved lines are not necessarily natural. Of course, the building [C] ought to be less conspicuous than it is, and the revised plan corrects this. Plainly, too, the statues are introductions of a later date, and the original designer is not responsible for placing them where they are. They might be well removed to the points [NN]. If this were done I do not discover any great superiority in the proposed plan over the old one. The area is so small that the insertion of a bit of rectangular treatment surrounded by a curvilinear treatment seems incongruous. Nor is it large enough for a “variety of design, abundance of shade, an effect of wide green lawns with seemingly unstudied, yet artistic, arrangement of trees, shrubs and grass, which produce pleasingly naturalistic impressions and illusions.” An attempt to accomplish all this in so contracted a space must result in confusion. Let us have symmetry where this is needed, but curvilinear symmetry and rectangular symmetry ought not to be mixed up in so small a place . . . Altogether, if there could be some rearrangement in the planting to make the symmetry of the present plan more evident, it strikes me as better than the new ones . . . Messrs. Bell & Langton have been
hampered by their efforts to save standing trees, so that they were allowed very little freedom of treatment, and it is not fair to criticise their plan as an original work.

New York City. S.A.

To the Editor of Garden and Forest:

Sir,—I observe that in both plans of Madison Square, published in your issue for April 8th, the paths which converge at the circles are very inaccurately centered—that is, the axes of the paths do not point to the centres of the circle, and if the designs were executed as shown on the map the result would be disastrous. This, however, may be simply carelessness on the part of the draughtsman. I should add that both plans ought to show great seating capacity. Seats ought to be recessed so that the feet of those using them will not be in the way of pedestrians, because the paths as wide as those in the plans give no more than the necessary walking space.

New York L.G.S.

[Garden and Forest 9 (1896): 158-159]

MADISON SQUARE AGAIN

To the Editor of Garden and Forest:

Sir,—Your correspondent, S. A. . . . criticises the plan of Madison Square of Messrs. Bell & Langton because the centre of the park is formalized. I think the criticism just. He points out the symmetrical arrangement of paths as they exist, and says that the place is too small to contain formal as well as naturalistic effects. A seven-acre piece of ground is certainly too small for effects of wide green lawns if the centre is taken up with a rectilinear scheme covering more than an acre and a half. But seven acres are enough for naturalistic effects of respectable extent. Your correspondents (right, as I think) agree that formal features are desirable in a park of this kind. I do not believe, however, in the value of "symmetry" in lines of travel on a place of this size. This symmetry is not very obvious even on paper until emphasized by black lines, and it might be apparent to an observer hovering over it in a balloon. But how shall one who strolls into the square know that the path in which he walks is balanced by a similar on the other side? Artists in landscape too often forget that their paper plans are deceptive. Cannot effects of wide green lawns, abundance of shade and so forth be combined in seven acres with the popular formal effects? I think they can by relegating the formal design to a part of the ground where it will not interfere with the appearance of size. I enclose a design as a suggestion . . .

BB are the statues, C the kiosk, A the Farragut monument . . .

Pittsburg, PA. H. A. Caparn

[Garden and Forest 9 (1896): 178]