

A Study of Schenley Park: Historical Interpretation to Guide Intervention

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The 114-year-old Schenley is Pittsburgh's nineteenth century flagship park that has evolved over time and responded to changes in the city. This study offers a historical interpretation of Schenley Park and provides recommendations for how this interpretation can guide future intervention in it.

Following an extended period of growth, development and significance, Schenley Park witnessed environmental degradation and declining relevance. After years of relative neglect, it is only recently that there is renewed interest in the park and the Pittsburgh Regional Parks Master Plan provided guidelines for future intervention. Though the Master Plan recognizes the need to nurture the park's historic legacy, guidelines addressing this legacy lack a holistic approach that addresses the multiple dimensions of the historic park landscape. In part, this is because available scholarship on park history is largely site specific, focuses on developments in the park but does not adequately address the context and intent behind these developments.

This study fills that gap in scholarship, and interprets the history of Schenley Park in a manner that addresses the park as a system, examines the ideological and temporal layers in it and connects these to the physical landscape. In exploring ideas associated with the park, the project identifies that at given periods in the park's history, certain ideas had a stronger influence than others did; and these define Ideological Eras in the park. In addition to defining Ideological Eras, the study identifies and examines themes expressed in the park that have influenced developments in it across the Ideological Eras. Finally, the dominant ideas and themes are linked to the physical features and use in the park, and to each other.

Through the focus on ideas and themes associated with Schenley, the study identifies its relationship to broader social, political and economic conditions both in Pittsburgh and in the national context, in the United States. In this manner, this project reveals multiple dimensions to the park and suggests that intervention should be planned in a holistic manner that integrates the physical, ideological and temporal layers in the landscape.

To summarize, this project helps to understand the value of Schenley Park and serves as a reference to inform and facilitate its interpretation and preservation. The study is suitable for discussion in the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation at Sonoma since it is aligned with the main theme of the conference that discusses 200 years of Landscape Evolution. The story of Schenley Park is closely linked with the evolution of landscape architecture in the United States; and a discussion of Schenley's history and preservation, though site specific, addresses issues relevant to many historic cultural landscapes. This study thus also contributes to the discussion on the future of historic landscape preservation, an important concern of the attendees of the Annual Meeting.