Olmsted and Vaux worked mentally on their evolving landscape by taking long walks through the park site and over its still-barren grounds *in the moonlight*. Some say because they were too busy by day, others however, because they wanted a certain *effect*. The park as nocturne, so to speak.

*Jacob Wray Mould at the Bethesda Terrace staircase under construction, 1862. (Photo by Victor Provost, courtesy of the George Eastman Museum.)*

Here the mid-19th century fad for things Moorish seems significant. Washington Irving, Olmsted’s
patron, started it with his *Tales of the Alhambra*. [By the way, a wonderful book if you’ve never read it.] For Moorish projects Olmsted and Vaux hired the eccentric “ugly and uncouth but very clever J. Wray Mould, architect and universal genius.” The unjustly neglected Mould had actually traveled in the near east and had assisted Owen Jones in the preparation of his monumental study of the Alhambra. “Mould became deeply imbued with the spirit of Islamic architecture and applied its elegant proportions, lavish conventionalized ornament and colorful tile work to the enrichment of the Central Park Terrace and Arcade.” [It’s a quote from a little pamphlet called *The Men Who Made Central Park* by M. M. Graff.]

Thus, Central Park is meant in part as a reflection of the Alhambra and its garden palace, the Generalife in Granada, in Spain, which in turn were meant as reflections of paradise, the earthly paradise of “water, green things and a beautiful face,” as the prophet Mohammed is supposed to have said. If heaven is a *city* for Christianity, it is a *garden* for Islam.

This aspect of Islam appealed to 19th century Romantics, just as Islam in general appealed to a certain anti-Christian free-thinking rationalist 19th century tendency. Olmsted harbored a strong dislike for organized Christianity, but he was certainly a nature mystic in the typical American vein. In short, he was both a rationalist and a Romantic.


20 Graff. p.21.
Violin player busking below Bethesda Terrace. (Courtesy of Paul Lowry and Creative Commons.)

Early morning under the Moorish influenced Bethesda Terrace. (Photo courtesy of Francisco Diez and Creative Commons.)
Another component of Victorian American taste demanded the Gothic for its fulfillment. Olmsted and Vaux harbored no perverse attachment to the excesses of Gothic revival, but the mysterious nature of the park demanded a few touches, such as the now-vanished “Hermit’s Cave” in the Ramble, [*Try to find that. It would be a nice project.*] and most notably the Gothic gem of the Belvedere Castle. The shape of the tower says “huge,” but in fact is quite tiny, hence the eye is deceived on viewing it with a *trompe l’oeil* sensation of standing in a landscape much bigger than it really is.

*Ramble Cave, Central Park in 1863 before it was sealed around 1930. (Courtesy of the The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library.)*
Stairway to the sealed entrance to the Ramble Cave. (Courtesy of Talbor Von Sregor, Atlas Obscura.)

The original 1865 Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wray Mould design for the Victorian folly Belvedere Castle, built in 1869.
Olmsted called the park *rus in urbe*, Latin for “the country in the city.” It was also “night in day,” an expression of silvery vanishments, and shadowy trysts of hidden glades glowing weirdly in a kind of narrative moonshine.

For paradise, now read “utopia.” A secularization has occurred. The visions of the mystics are to be realized here and now in leaf and stone. But this practicality has not obliterated the yearning desire for the unknown place of authentic life. Today’s Central Park nature walks and Euell Gibbons-inspired gathering expeditions are *echoes* of hunting-gathering culture and of the totemic spirituality of the borderland between clearing and forest. Central Park re-creates these longed-for images in the form of recreation. Because, of course, in fact Central Park is *not* paradise, *not* utopia, but rather the image or trace of utopia. Central Park is *not* the phalanstery, and the world has *not* been transformed into harmony.

Walter Benjamin used the concept of the “utopian trace” to explain the success of the commodity. Marx had pointed out that the commodity plays “metaphysical tricks.” Benjamin attempted to produce an epistemology or even a theology by which to understand this metaphysics. In brief, we desire a commodity for the trace of something in it rather than for its actual value or use. We desire a memory or taste of an aura of authenticity and of life. The living tree or human, or the work of art in its unique immediacy, all possess this aura. In the reproduction of the image of this aura the commodity carries out
its strange seduction: “your money for your life!” Or rather, for a promise of that authentic life, the real thing now, which the commodity will always postpone and put off, and never actually deliver. The mere trace of authentic life will induce us to hope that next time, our money will buy us happiness. Again we’re disappointed, and again seduced. After all, no one agrees to work, consume, die in utter hopelessness. The commodity gives us hope even as it denies its realization. It reminds us of our buried utopian desires, perhaps only subliminally, our longing for a truer life. The more the commodity is reproduced, the more diluted and diminished its aura becomes. Advertising tries to restore a seductive image of aura, but if this image did not in some way assuage our loss, we would not buy it.