



Product of NATURE

Elizabeth Barlow Rogers saved one of America's most important creations—New York's Central Park. What continues to thrive is the result of what she planted.

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH BY *Wendy Young* WRITTEN BY *David Masello*



When Elizabeth Barlow Rogers walks to the windows of her New York apartment, she takes in the full panorama of Central Park. What she sees from her vantage is an 843-acre work of art, more so even than a natural creation. She points to distant rocky outcroppings and speaks of their sculpted quality, the patinas and sheens of their schist. Of undulating landscapes at the center, she refers to them as “romantically picturesque.”

“People think I’m responsible for painting every tree blossom,” she says, referring to her work as the visionary founder of the Central Park Conservancy in 1980, a nonprofit body that has since grown very deep roots in the life of New York and whose effects and success have germinated similar organizations in other cities. “But I always tell the people who thank me that what saved Central Park was a collective effort. You have to remember, it’s all manmade. What’s meant to be picturesque, meant to be scenic, meant to seem natural is actually naturalistic.”

When Rogers, a Texas native, moved to New York in 1964, Central Park was more than overgrown. The expanse at the center of Manhattan dating from the 1850s had devolved into a dangerous, graffitied, unkempt place. “There was a pervasive atmosphere of lawlessness,” she recalls, “It felt dangerous and it was. Hotels told visitors not to go in, especially to the Rambles,” she says, referencing a densely wooded thirty-acre expanse, which her Conservancy has since made into one of the most sought-after destinations, with pathways that follow bird trails, a creek, and the shoreline of the park’s lake. At a time when few New



Elizabeth Barlow Rogers (far left) had a vision to restore New York's Central Park—every monument, tree, bridge, and pathway. Among her organization's many successes, the Central Park Conservancy restored and rebuilt (clockwise from left) a wisteria-festooned pergola, the fountain at the center of Bethesda Terrace, and the Victorian-era Harlem Meer Boathouse, once a burned out shell.



Yorkers would venture deep into the park, Rogers took regular walks there, admitting that she was once “lightly mugged, meaning that when the guy demanded money, I told him ‘No, you’re not getting it.’ He walked away.”

In her new book, *Saving Central Park* (Knopf), she describes with poignancy the importance of the park, historically and personally. After the end of her first marriage in 1979, she began the self-imposed task of forming the private-sector Conservancy to restore the park to a new glory, hacking through the thicket of city bureaucracy in the process. While doing so, she met Ted Rogers, a prominent corporate executive. He became an integral figure on the board of her nascent organization and she and he would take many walks through the



Though involved as president of the Foundation for Landscape Studies and a board member of the Library of American Landscape History, Rogers oversees the C.L. Browning Ranch, an expanse of land she inherited from her father and which she has ensured remains an exemplar of the natural landscape of Texas Hill Country. The 977-acre expanse features a varied terrain of canyons, meadows, fields, creeks, and riverbeds.



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Conservatory Garden, once the site of a nineteenth-century conservatory, but then a neglected part of the park. As landscape design work proceeded under her direction for new planting beds, a central greensward, and pergola, she and Ted fell in love. As she writes, “The garden is a signature statement of the success of the Central Park Conservancy....But for me it will always stand for something more: a reminder of the beginning of a marriage that has been, as I often like to say, the best of all the many good things that Central Park has brought my way over the past forty years.”

While Rogers was born and raised in Alamo Heights, Texas, then an undeveloped outer area of San Antonio, she has grown into “a true New Yorker,” as she calls herself. “My mother said she had put down her roots in stony Texas soil, so when I moved to New York as a young woman, I was the outlier in terms of my family.” But she admits that whenever she sees the wide skies and open scenery of Santa Fe, where she has a summer home, or when she visits the C.L. Browning Ranch in Texas Hill Country she inherited from her father and has since put under conservation management, “I realize I still have a bit of the West in me.”

Though she left her role as president of the Central Park Conservancy in 1996, she continues to be a hearty

force for preserving landscapes. In 2005, she founded the Foundation for Landscape Studies and in a kind of cross pollination, she is also a board member of the influential Library of American Landscape History (LALH), the noted publisher of books that advance the discipline of American landscape architecture; LALH gave her their inaugural Legacy Award in 2017.

Many a New Yorker rightly claims that it is impossible to imagine life in Manhattan without Central Park. Were it not for Rogers’s stewardship of the Conservancy, the park might likely have devolved into a barren wilderness or simply an expanse of buildable land. It is easy to find Rogers somewhere in Central Park on any day, tracing a pathway through the Rambles, walking beneath a pergola knitted with wisteria, crossing a cast-iron bridge, or passing through a stone underpass fashioned by the park’s original designers, Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux. There is likely no planting or structure, no outcropping or allée she does not know (or helped plant herself). Central Park flourishes as both a resource and a work of art, made by man, with a lot of help from nature.

When asked if Central Park is a finished masterpiece, she replies, “You never finish a landscape. A landscape is always in progress, for the health of the land itself.” ■