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I have loved cities for as long as I can remember. Born in Brooklyn, I grew up in rural New York but made regular pilgrimages back to the sunbathing place we called "the city." There was no finer treat for me as a child than seeing a Broadway show after spending the day on the Lower East Side, first with my parents and later with my sisters, hunting for tanglers and drinking my sweat in all the intense sights, smells, and sounds of the city, which began within five miles.

When the urban wilderness overwhelmed my senses, I discovered sanctuaries in Central Park and drank in the refreshing calm of forests and meadows, tranquil lakes, and miles of tree-lined paths. As a child I must have assumed that these "natural wonders" had always graced the island of Manhattan.

Later, I learned that Central Park was the result of a monumental 15-year gardening project during the mid-1850s that transformed neighborhoods, removed more than 10 million cords of soil and rock, and planted more than 5 million trees, shrubs, and plants.

I also learned that Central Park was the vision of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who considered equitable access to green and open space as a part of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Describing the Central Park project as "a democratic development of the highest significance," Olmsted proposed valuable advice to the growing nation: If you want a healthy democracy, you must create green spaces.

My appreciation of the vital link between healthy democracies and green spaces deepened when I came to Philadelphia to become president of the University of Pennsylvania in 2001. From a continuing on-campus reforestation and open spaces project that had existed for nearly a century, I began a series of landscape projects that would transform the campus and the city. As we discussed our future with neighboring residents and businesses and with our own students, faculty, and staff, my colleagues and I more fully discerned how our plans for greening outdoor parking