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LaGasse Medal Nominations
(Non-Landscape Architect Category)
c/o Carolyn Mitchell, Honors & Awards Coordinator
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye St., NW
Washington, DC 20001

Re: Nomination of Tupper Thomas for LaGasse Medal

Dear Executive Committee and Trustees,

It is with enthusiasm that I nominate Tupper Thomas for the LaGasse Medal. In light of her decades-long dedication to and leadership of Prospect Park, such an honor recognizing “notable contributions to the management and conservancy of natural resources and/or public landscapes,” seems custom made.

The 1970s economic crisis in New York City had a devastating effect on its park system. This included Prospect Park in Brooklyn, which during that time barely resembled the 19th Century idyllic haven created by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, considered by many the crowning achievement of the partnership. It suffered from general neglect and had evolved into a blighted refuge for vandals and drug dealers. Park attendance reached an all-time low in 1979. This was the situation that Tupper, with a background as an urban planner, walked into when she became park administrator a year later.

Tupper immediately and tirelessly worked to get people back in to the park by improving its public image and making it safer. While understanding the importance of respecting the park’s cultural heritage and restoring its beauty, she knew that when it came right down to it, what was most important for the park was its potential for enhancing people’s lives. She also understood that the band-aid approach to maintenance and restoration that the Parks Department was capable of on its own could not get the job done.

In order to make a bigger difference, she co-founded the public-private partnership, the Prospect Park Alliance, in 1987. This was modeled on the example provided by its more famous neighbor, the Central Park Conservancy and is perhaps her greatest professional achievement. Through the non-profit organization the process of revitalization was formalized and the door was opened to needed contributions from wealthy donors, corporations and grant awards. An annual budget of \$200,000 in 1987 has grown to over \$8 million today thanks in large part to her success as a fund raiser. Even with a far less affluent adjacent population than Central Park, she has been able to supplement City funds enough to make significant improvements to the park’s 585 acres. The Lake, Nethermead, Long Meadow, the Parade Ground, and the Ravine— among others and all significant landscapes— have been restored to the vision of Olmsted and Vaux by a staff of landscape architects, horticulturalists and other profes-

sionals assembled under her leadership. The success of any public landscape can be seen through the people who enjoy it. In 1980, an estimated 1.7 million people visited Prospect Park every year. Today that number has swelled to over 9 million.

I should point out that I do not know Tupper personally. I worked for the Central Park Conservancy in the 1990s and have seen the results of her work on many visits to Prospect Park, but I have never had the privilege of meeting her. Yet it was still important to me to make this nomination. In my role working for a historic landscape, albeit a far less significant one, I have long been inspired by her and her accomplishments. She exemplifies the values inherent in landscape stewardship and puts on display as clearly as anything I can think of the power of professional passion and the difference a single person can make.

Since 1987 Tupper has worn two hats - as the park administrator for Prospect Park and the president of the Prospect Park Alliance. This year she announced her retirement from both. Although it will probably always be considered an "Olmsted park," the significant legacy she will leave behind cannot be denied. Hers will be mighty big shoes to fill. I believe now is the appropriate time for ASLA to recognize the significant contributions she has made to our profession and to one of our most important landscapes by presenting her with the LaGasse Medal.

Thank you for your consideration in this nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark H. Hough". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "M" and a long, sweeping tail.

Mark H. Hough, ASLA
Campus Landscape Architect

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Executive Committee
LaGasse Medal Nominations
c/o Carolyn Mitchell
636 Eye Street NY
Washington D.C. 20001-3736

I am delighted to support the nomination of Tupper Thomas for the LaGasse Medal.

I have known Tupper through her role as Executive Director of Prospect Park for over twenty five years, in my capacity as a professional landscape architect working in the Park, as fellow board member of the National Association for Olmsted Parks and as a friend.

During that time I have been reminded again and again of the remarkable qualities that Tupper brings to this position. Her dedication to the genius of Olmsted and Vaux and her commitment to the Park's restoration are, of course, of paramount importance, but she also brings -- what may be equally important -- her humor, her indefatigable energy and the warmth of her personality, all of which ensure that her vision is carried out faithfully.

Her instinctive understanding of what Prospect Park's landscape means, visually, ecologically and socially, are extraordinary and have led to a multi-faceted restoration which, I believe, meets the highest standards of historic preservation while offering Brooklyn's diverse population a place where they can relax and enjoy the Park's rurality or engage in one of the many physical activities on offer.

I urge the Executive Committee to select Tupper as the Medal's 2011 recipient.

Sincerely



Nicholas Quennell FASLA



City of New York
Parks & Recreation

The Arsenal
Central Park
New York, New York 10065

Adrian Benepe
Commissioner

LeGasse Medal Nominations
Non-Landscape Architect Category
American Society of Landscape Architects
c/o Carolyn Mitchell
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to express my support for Tupper Thomas's nomination for an ASLA LeGasse Medal.

In her more than 30 years as Prospect Park Administrator and President of the Prospect Park Alliance, Ms. Thomas performed wondrous acts of alchemy to restore one of the most majestic parks in the world. Her tireless efforts to bring Prospect Park back to its full glory, as originally envisioned by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, have drawn over nine million annual visitors to the park. These visitors, both Brooklyn residents and tourists alike, come to Prospect Park to enjoy its deep woodlands, sweeping vistas, and rolling meadows, features that have only been improved over the years by Ms. Thomas and her dedicated staff of landscape architects and other designers.

Specific projects that Ms. Thomas spearheaded, as the Prospect Park Alliance President, included the restoration of the Park's carousel, the \$9 million Woodlands Restoration Campaign, which was completed in 2000, and the current Lakeside Center Project, which will renovate 26 acres of parkland surrounding the Prospect Park Lake and add three acres of green space, while also bringing in a contemporary skating center. The Lakeside Center is an ambitious project that will revitalize the landscape of the Lake area, making it a visually stunning destination for all parkgoers.

Many experts in the history of design and creators of landscaped parks believe that Prospect Park was the "magnum opus" of Olmsted and Vaux. Tupper's work over the last three decades has similarly elevated Prospect Park into the stratosphere of the great parks of the world. She is eminently qualified to receive the LeGasse Medal.

Sincerely,

Adrian Benepe



X

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Tupper Thomas, President of the Prospect Park Alliance

Occupation: President of the [Prospect Park Alliance](#).

You've been Prospect Park's administrator for the past 25 years (!). Tell us about some of the big changes the park has undergone.

The biggest change is that people are back in the Park. When I became Prospect Park's first administrator in 1980, what was most sorely missing from Prospect Park was people --- people from every neighborhood who enjoyed coming to the Park, who felt comfortable in the Park, cared about it and would give of their time and energy to helping their Park. We established a Community Committee ten years ago that has grown to include representatives of more than 75 groups and each year more than 5,000 people volunteer their time to help the Park.

So many of the Park's natural features such as the Woodlands, which is the only forest left in Brooklyn, and the watercourse of the Ravine, have been restored. Hundreds of people contributed to this massive effort, including the Prospect Park Alliance's Natural Resources Crew, the Youth Council's Woodlands Crew and many volunteers.

The first capital project the Alliance tackled was the restoration of the Park's historic Carousel in 1990. Since then most of the Park's playgrounds have been redone and we completely rebuilt the historic ballfields of the Parade Ground. The gorgeous, 100-year-old beaux-arts Boathouse reopened in 2002 after renovations as the first urban Audubon Center.

What is the Prospect Park Alliance's relationship with the Parks Department? Is it like the relationship with the Parks Department has with the Central Park Conservancy?

The Alliance was formed in 1987 as a Public-Private partnership with the City of New York. We raise money so that the Park has a Natural Resources Crew to keep it looking wonderful. Plus we take care of the Parade Ground and run many of the Park concessions. Unlike the Central Park Conservancy, we don't have a maintenance contract with the City. Because I am dually the Park Administrator, reporting to the Parks Commissioner, and the President of the Prospect Park Alliance, it's a seamless relationship. The Parks Commissioner serves on the Alliance Board and the Mayor has two appointees.



One of the most infamous incidents is the 1987 incident when an 11 year old boy was mauled by polar bears at the [Prospect Park Zoo](#). How did the zoo recover?

That was the worst tragedy in my 25 years at the Park. At the time we were already in the process of planning to renovate the Zoo because we knew it could be so much better. When it was closed for remodeling, all the large animals were removed. The Wildlife Conservation Society now manages it fabulously and it entertains and educates so many children each year. We work closely with them to coordinate programs, such as their Boo at the Zoo event during our [Haunted Halloween Walk and Carnival](#).

Even though crime has dropped dramatically, there are still some incidents here and there in the park. How does the Prospect Park Alliance work with the NYPD? And what can parkgoers do?

In the past it was almost so expected that there would be crime in the Park that the media didn't even report it. The Police Department and the Parks Department work closely together to make the Park safer and we have significant Police. During the summer the Auxiliary Police log something close to 30,000 patrol hours. The police are very sensitive to the community's need to feel safe in the Park. We also have installed an extensive signage system in the Park to help people find their way around. And all the programming we do – events such as the Halloween Walk, the nature programs run out of the [Audubon Center](#), the volunteer groups – this has led to a dramatic increase in the number of people who come to the Park (8 million today versus 2 million in 1980).

One of our favorite things about Prospect Park is [seeing the dogs frolic leash-free](#) in the morning. What is an initiative you're particularly proud of?

The creation of the Prospect Park Alliance is definitely the initiative I am most proud of. Now there's a group of community and business people who advocate and fight for the Park. That means it should never slip back into the state it was 25 years ago.

I love seeing the dogs out there too! Not long after I started as Park Administrator, a group of dog owners came to me complaining about people getting tickets for having their dogs off leash. So we worked with the Parks Department to change the policy so that dogs run without a leash from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. every day in certain areas. Because of that, more people started coming to the Park, which made the joggers feel safer, which made parents with kids feel safer and it snowballed on from there. The dog owners group FIDO is great about helping enforce the rules, and we of course have a great dog beach – where we even allow the dogs to go skinny-dipping!

What are some exciting Prospect Park developments for the future?

The new Lakeside Center will really be a link between the Park's past and future. The current Wollman Rink, built in 1960, is very popular as a place for skating but it's falling apart and our maintenance people are practically using band-aids to keep it together. Architecturally it's nothing to get excited about and it intrudes upon the vista of the lake Olmsted and Vaux had originally planned. So not only will a new building give us an even better skating facility, but the Alliance's Office of Design and Construction is working with the architects to create a design that makes the most of this beautiful location.



And this weekend is the Halloween Walk and Carnival. What are you dressing up as?

A good witch. A few years ago a woman with a child pointed to me and said to her daughter, “Look, that’s the same witch that used to be here when I was a kid.” So I guess after 25 years of dressing up I don’t need to use much makeup!

What is your favorite thing about Prospect Park? What is a part of the park you think more people should know about?

I love walking through the Ravine and coming out onto the Nethermead. It’s such a lovely open meadow surrounded by so many trees, including the ones I planted (we have a commemorative tree program) for each of my parents and a dogwood for my dog! People should spend more time discovering the Midwoods, the Lullwater and the [Peninsula](#) that reaches out into Brooklyn’s only lake. Right now we’re getting ready to open these three new nature trails that will be a perfect way to discover more of the Park.

After Prospect Park, what is your favorite New York City park? Are there other Parks in New York?

What's your favorite subway line?

The Q, because it takes you near to the entrance to the Park’s Audubon Center and it is really a fast ride from Manhattan. And I like the F because it comes out from underground as it crosses the Gowanus. It’s funny you ask about subway lines, because we even modeled the directional paths on our maps and on signs for navigating through the Park on the colored lines of New York subway maps.



The Prospect Park Haunted Walk and Haunted Carnival is on Saturday, October 29, 2005, between 12 and 3 p.m. Enter the Park at the Prospect Park Southwest and 16th Street entrance. For general information on Prospect Park, call the Park Hotline at (718) 965-8999 or visit

www.prospectpark.org

Photographs of Tupper Thomas (2) and the Audobon Center are from the Prospect Park Archives
Contact the [author](#) of this article or email tips@gothamist.com with further questions, comments or tips.
By [Jen Chung](#) in [Arts and Events](#) on October 27, 2005 6:09 AM

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April 5, 2010

Returning Prospect Park to the People

By **KAREEM FAHIM**

Drugs were sold at the carousel. Muggers used the cover provided by the park's shrubs and foliage. One year, near the skating rink, a man was found shot to death, and another year, the acting supervisor of the zoo was arrested and charged with shooting animals.

In the 1970s, Prospect Park in Brooklyn looked more like a crime scene than the pastoral refuge imagined a century earlier by **Frederick Law Olmsted** and **Calvert Vaux**.

As if to advertise the woeful state of the park, in 1976 Columbia, the figure driving atop the arch at **Grand Army Plaza**, fell over in her chariot, a victim of disrepair.

Four years later, perhaps not fully aware of the mess the park had become, a 35-year-old former city bureaucrat and urban planner named Tupper Thomas answered a newspaper ad for a job as the park's administrator. She was from Minnesota, knew nothing about parks and even spelled Mr. Olmsted's name wrong on her application.

"This apple-cheeked young woman came into my office," said **Gordon J. Davis**, the former parks commissioner who hired Ms. Thomas. "She looked nothing like a New Yorker, and sounded nothing like someone from Brooklyn. She giggled the whole time. Tupper seemed to have come from the moon."

Three decades later, Ms. Thomas, who plans to announce her retirement on Tuesday, has become a Brooklyn institution and is widely seen as the park's indefatigable savior.

Her fans credit her with turning Prospect Park into a worthy rival to Central Park, and for handing a lost treasure of wilderness and recreation back to the people of Brooklyn.

A place that many people shunned has now become the borough's popular and crowded backyard. "Everyone says the 1940s were the park's best era," Ms. Thomas said. "I think this is Prospect Park's moment."

Her success can be partly measured in numbers. When Ms. Thomas took the job, fewer than two million people visited the park annually, while today, visitors number more than nine million a year, according to the Prospect Park Alliance. The alliance's annual budget has

grown to \$8 million or \$9 million a year, up from about \$200,000 in 1987.

Adrian Benepe, the current commissioner of parks, citing a different measure of success, talked about the experience Ms. Thomas restored to the park:

“Walk from Grand Army Plaza through Long Meadow into the Ravine, past the rivers and waterfalls, to the Nethermead, and to the lake and the boathouse,” he said. “If you want to understand Olmsted and Vaux, you do that. That was lost,” he said, “that experiential continuum is her masterpiece.”

On Sunday, in the near-perfect weather that a park is created for, Ms. Thomas strolled among the barbecuers and the sunbathers, reflecting on what she called her life’s work. She answered random questions from visitors: how to get to the Picnic House, or where to find an empty bench on a day when most were taken.

She first visited New York during the summer between her junior and senior years at Goucher College, in Baltimore, Md., to volunteer for the mayoral campaign of **John V. Lindsay**. She lived on the couches of friends in Manhattan. “There was no going back to Minnesota,” she said.

When she returned after college, it was to Crown Heights, Brooklyn, a few blocks from the park, though Ms. Thomas, who once worked for the city’s housing agency, rarely ventured there.

When she first started working in the park, Ms. Thomas’s biggest challenge was drawing visitors to a place widely seen as dangerous — even her neighbors questioned her sanity for working there.

She lured dog owners by letting them run their dogs off leash from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. in certain parts of the park. An annual **Halloween** event drew children, who later asked their parents to take them back to the park.

On Sunday, she stopped at the carousel, one of her first reclamation projects as administrator. An expert from Colorado had repainted the horses, dragons and other animals, and donors paid money to name them. Those in line for the carousel were a snapshot of nearby neighborhoods: Flatbush, Borough Park and maybe Midwood. A balloon man sitting nearby counted his money. The scene clearly pleased Ms. Thomas, who still lives in Crown Heights.

Walking past the Ravine, she noted that it had been the park’s pronounced color line, dividing white residents from Park Slope from black residents who lived to the south and east of the park. And though she said steps had been taken to ease the divide, a recent survey carried out

by the park — and a simple look around — suggests that it persists.

Ms. Thomas served four park commissioners and four mayors, and was often overshadowed by **Elizabeth Barlow Rogers**, the administrator of Central Park who was an Olmsted scholar and a city planner.

But in many ways Ms. Thomas had the harder task. While Central Park had a natural constituency of donors, including the wealthy residents who lived nearby and Manhattan's endless roster of corporate donors, Prospect Park's 585 acres bordered both affluent and low-income neighborhoods. Ms. Thomas' earliest big-ticket donor, **Henry Christensen III**, a lawyer, gave \$100.

He and Ms. Thomas became partners in the Prospect Park Alliance, the public-private partnership modeled on the **Central Park Conservancy** that Ms. Thomas counts among her signature achievements.

And though when she first started, she might not have known an "elm from a spruce," as Mr. Davis put it, she had other gifts. Using surveys that showed where visitors to the park lived, Ms. Thomas prodded Brooklyn's elected officials to provide money. And she brought landscape architects and designers onto her staff, ensuring the quality of renovations and restorations.

Ms. Thomas said she will leave her post early in 2011 after she has completed raising money for the new **Lakeside Center**.

Her greatest asset was enthusiasm, said **Henry J. Stern**, a former parks commissioner with whom she occasionally clashed. "She banged the drum," he said. "She was a rooter for her park and her borough."