

Knowing Olmsted

If Frederick Law Olmsted set out to photograph the parks and parkways that he designed more than 100 years ago, what would he choose to photograph today? Most likely his portfolio would include picnickers, frisbee players, bicyclists, joggers, and dog walkers (and dogs). In photographs featuring public events and private moments, he would explore the common impulse to enjoy the out-of-doors and escape from the bustle of the surrounding city. Yes, there would be solitary trees, gently curving roads, sweeping lawns, and paved and pebbled paths, but Olmsted's photographs would definitely include people. For him landscape was an expression of the subtle relationship between people and nature, and his landscaped parkland was intended not only as a place of beauty, but also as a meeting ground where the seeds of community might be sown.

Olmsted was a nineteenth-century visionary, but not a utopian. He was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1822 and crisscrossed the New England terrain enjoying scenes like those captured on canvas by painters including Cole, Cropsey, and Durand. His formal education ended early, but farming, extensive travel, reading, and writing set him on course for his later career. Like Thoreau, he dreaded the devastating impact of industrialization, but unlike the Walden recluse, he wanted to find ways to counteract it.

Travel to England in 1850 convinced him of the value of what he called "commonplace scenery"—not grand or prominent features, but ordinary materials combined to create pleasing effects. He visited private English parks and gardens, but he was most impressed with the public parks. Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park, for example, impressed the young Olmsted, who admired the idea that all classes of citizens could share in the enjoyment of a single picturesque landscape. He also admired the fact that the newly completed park had already improved the value of real estate in the surrounding area. By 1851, he was calling for the improvement of cities with "free public parks and gardens."

Well before germ theory was understood, at a time when waste was ubiquitous, land use zoning was nonexistent, and tenement dwellers had nowhere to turn for respite from an ever darker, noisier, and more polluted living and working environment, Olmsted suggested that cities might be significantly improved if swamps were drained, and other nuisances removed, and if curves replaced the tyranny of the grid. He recognized, too, that "healthy places of exercise and amusement" could appreciably improve life for the "poor, ignorant, homeless, abandoned," those who could not escape to country houses. As Laura Wood Roper notes in her Olmsted biography, he "not only cared for parks as scenery but saw them in the context of a social plan."¹

Without a doubt, the social dimension was as crucial to Olmsted's vision as the artistic, and it explains much of what motivated him to translate his talents from scientific farming, to park construction, urban design, and city planning. It also explains the logical connection between the *New York Daily Times* correspondent whose searing portrait of southern slavery so shaped northern consciousness just before the Civil War and the landscape architect who later designed major parks and park systems in cities across America. On his travels through the South, as later on the California frontier, Olmsted was distressed by the absence of good roads, decent buildings, schools, churches, and other enterprises that fostered what he called "communitiveness."² It is no surprise that he linked park building to the evolution of "civilized communities."

Olmsted first applied his ideas at Central Park, which he designed in conjunction with Calvert Vaux in 1858. Success in New York prompted demand for Olmsted's services elsewhere, and he was soon the nation's leading landscape architect — meeting with clients, defending plans, directing engineering, selecting plants, and supervising all with such care that many came to take his work for granted, hardly aware that most projects were built from scratch. After his retirement in 1895, his stepson and partner John and his son Frederick, Jr., carried on his design tradition for another half-century, dominating the profession and creating hundreds of new landscapes. Frederick, Jr., for example, wrote an influential report for Wellesley College in 1902 identifying the campus as an "immensely significant expression of geological history." He warned President Caroline Hazard not to allow future buildings to jeopardize the rare and intricately beautiful campus landscape.³ Aware of the value of its picturesque landscape, but pressed by change and faced with often conflicting priorities, Wellesley is about to begin the task of preparing a long-range management and restoration plan. The Olmsteds would have approved.

Unfortunately, public parks, including those in nearby Boston, are similarly threatened by change but they lack the College's devout constituency. Cities have slashed parks and recreation budgets, and competing demands for space and neighborhood decline have turned some parks into combat zones. That does not mean, however, that they are irrelevant or obsolete — only that they are linked to larger problems that face communities today.

If Olmsted photographed his own parks now, he would surely capture the sadness associated with age and neglect. But in images of people at play, at rest, and at work, he would also challenge us to a renewed commitment to beauty and shared space. And we would be wise to listen.

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¹ Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, 82.

² Victoria Post Ranney, ed., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, The California Frontier, 1863-1865*, Vol. 5, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, 659.

³ Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., to Caroline Hazard, 24 March 1902, The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

For More Information

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For writings on landscape design projects, see especially: *Creating Central Park, 1857-1861* (Vol. 3, 1983); *The Years of Olmsted, Vaux & Co., 1865-1874* (Vol. 6, 1992); and *Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems* (Supplementary Series Vol. 1, 1997).

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DOCUMENTARY RESOURCES

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The Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Mass.