FREDERICK LAW OLMS TED'S PARKS: ANTIQUES OR URBAN NECESSITIES?

Charles C. McLaughlin, Editor
The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers The American University

This article is taken from the text of a speech delivered by Dr. McLaughlin at the first annual conference of the National Association for Olmsted Parks held in Buffalo, NY in 1980. Additional copies may be purchased from the National Association.

Park preservation may soon have a place in our national life comparable to the rapidly growing architectural preservation movement as we rediscover our immense legacy of park acreage in the midst of our troubled and deteriorating cities. Are these great spaces worth preserving and caring for? Can we justify them with strong enough arguments to convince those who would cut public expenditures or those who would argue that the nineteenth-century public park has no place in our modern cities? Most of our major cities from Boston to San Francisco still have the landscaped parks which the city fathers set aside for public use and protected from developers in the second half of the last century. Twenty-seven of these in fifteen cities including Milwaukee, Brookline, Chicago, Rochester, Louisville, Detroit, and Buffalo were parks which Frederick Law Olmsted and his partners designed beginning with New York's Central Park in 1857.

Olmsted's parks have many friends today from coast to coast. Citizens have defended them from encroachments from the time they were built. Lately they justify preserving and restoring these great landscape compositions with the arguments of the conservationists and the ecologists spurred on by the counterculture. Also those alarmed at the deteriorating quality of existence in our cities have helped bring about almost a cult of Olmsted and his great parks. Attempts to restore these parks, despite tightening city budgets, are under way in many cities. Louisville, Kentucky, rebuilt Cherokee Park, following the original Olmsted planting plans, after a tornado wrecked it. The appeal of the old parks and admiration for the men who designed them climed with the Olmsted 150th birthday celebrations of 1972 such as those in the Chicago South Parks and New York Magazine's baking of an enormous cake in the shape of Central Park. In the same year many learned of Olmsted's great design accomplishments through major exhibitions at the Whitney Museum in New York and the National Gallery in Washington D.C.

Unfortunately, though, the mounting enthusiasm, while terribly important, does not guarantee that we can fully restore Olmsted's major works of landscape architecture to the use he had for them. It is far easier to reconstruct a building so that it looks exactly as it did in the past than it is to replant and rebuild a living and constantly changing landscape. We have to turn to Olmsted's writings as well as his plans to catch the spirit and intent of his work. To understand how to restore his parks we have to know the artistic and social conditions in which Olmsted worked, because his landscapes, although they seem to be natural, as he intended they should, are designed to be unified works of art, each unique to its own site and the purposes of the client. Being true to the genius of the place and the wishes of the client challenged Olmsted to produce artistic and ecological miracles when he designed parks for such unpromising locations as the rocky spine of Manhattan Island, the flat and swampy lake front of Chicago, and the polluted, muddy Back Bay lens of Boston.

MEDIATOR BETWEEN CIVILIZATION AND NATURE

Olmsted understood the constraints of climate and soil, but he was not a pioneering ecologist like George Perkins Marsh. Nor can we lump him with John Muir or Henry David Thoreau as an unabashed enthusiast for unspoiled wilderness, although he read and enjoyed their writings and was an active promoter of their aims. Working on the edge of our expanding cities, he mediated between civilization and nature as did his favorite English landscape gardeners, Humphry Repton, John Claudius Loudon, and Joseph Paxton. Like these practitioners in the picturesque tradition, his art ranged from the aesthetic effects of the architect to those of wild and untamed nature. Artificial sand parks, electric launches, and parade grounds were just as important in his work as the elements of landscape he introduced into his compositions to approximate effects he had observed and enjoyed from such diverse places as the Isle of Wight, the Connecticut Valley, and the Isthmus of Panama. Olmsted was a deliberate artist.
who manipulated scenic effects for social purposes. A look at the park reports he wrote from 1858 to 1895 proves the point.

In discussing the needs of Buffalo, in 1888 he wrote: "For people who have monotonous occupations amid sombre surroundings, tranquilizing natural scenes are less demanded than by those by which gayety, liveliness, and a slight spirit of adventure are stimulated." He therefore proposed that there be a park along the shores of Lake Erie with a running and bicycling track, facilities for balloon ascensions, parades, and exhibitions. The park would have a beach for surf bathing, like that at Newport, Rhode Island, behind which he wanted a shallower stretch of water heated by the sun for warm water swimming. Beyond the bathers the water could be used for boating and would be studded with islands which could be reserved for special occasions like outings and weddings just as in the parks of Paris. At night the islands would twinkle with small electric lights powered from batteries charged by windmills. Olmsted suggested that the park be designed like the Hagà Park in Stockholm, to be accessible only by water. Even getting to the park would be a pleasant adventure, a short, ocean ride in an electric launch from downtown. Once in the park, children would find sand parks and other amusements, and their parents, restaurants.

Olmsted included in his park plans many facilities such as bathhouses, playgrounds, out-of-doors concert stages, and exhibit space that turn-of-the-century Progressives, the parks and recreation leaders of the 1930's, and open space enthusiasts of the 1960's were to demand for their contemporaries. The important difference between these later proponents of active sports and recreation and Olmsted was that his designs displayed greater aesthetic sensitivity and his proposed facilities did not interfere with tranquilizing vistas of park scenery for the casual saunterer. The Olmsted and Vaux design for the Chicago South Parks in the 1870's is a good example of his approach.

In the 1871 report Olmsted and Vaux envisioned interconnected parks to be built from the swampy, windswept lake front, to the flat prairie three miles to the west with ample space for a whole set of different uses such as lacrosse, cricket, tennis, boating, archery, skating, parades, and balloon ascensions. He carefully placed facilities for all these activities so they would not interfere with each other or disturb those enjoying the lovely vistas of meadow, foliage, and still stretches of water to be seen on foot, horseback, or in carriages. For Jackson Park on Lake Michigan, Olmsted proposed a great pier running into the lake resembling those at Brighton or Nice where large boats could tie up. The pier sheltered an inlet leading to the lagoon in the park which in turn was to be connected by a canal down the middle of the Midway Plaisance to the lake in Washington Park to the west. Thus, the intrepid boater could paddle a canoe all the way from Jackson Park to Washington Park as well as others could explore them on foot, horseback, or driving.

As he had responded imaginatively to the park possibilities of the Buffalo and Chicago lakefronts, so Olmsted literally rose to the occasion at Montreal where he had to decide what to do with a little mountain, Mount Royal. He cautioned the park commissioners against trying to fill up the vertical landscape with the usual furniture of an ordinary park. Also, he wrote them that it would be silly to serve up the view in an indigestible mouthful by sliding people up and down the slope on a funicular railway. Instead, he wanted the delights of mountain scenery and expanding vistas to steal upon the visitors gradually in a gentle climb up the slope on a winding carriage road or on footpaths marked by views at different levels. Even more subtle was the effect of altitude Olmsted wanted to achieve by altering the vegetation towards more and more Alpine varieties the higher one climbed. He was practicing a form of "aesthetic ecology" not existing in the natural ground cover to achieve the effect Olmsted wanted.

SOME DISAGREE OR MISUNDERSTAND

The city officials and other clients with whom he had to deal often missed the subtle social and aesthetic imaginativeness that Olmsted displayed in his park designs and his genius is still misinterpreted today even by critics and historians who make a point of understanding the past sympathetically. One such is Sam Bass Warner, an eminent urban historian who argued in a laudatory review of Laura Wood Roper's biography of Frederick Law Olmsted that the landscape parks Olmsted designed are now antiques, irrelevant for the present city both in purpose and in aesthetic. He wrote:

Today it is clear that the park movement came to the Atlantic world at that moment when cities were growing so large that the ordinary citizen could no longer get out of them on Sunday. Since most of the city dwellers in the 19th century were former country folk, access to the symbols of that country was an issue of great popular movement... Olmsted was also a fine artist and his parks not only gave the public the pastoral spaces it longed for, he gave it his landscape. His skill, as J. B. Jackson has pointed out, was to remake the rough lands on the edges of our cities into scenes resembling the pre-Civil War Connecticut countryside of Olmsted's experience... Yet for all the parks' charm, there has always seemed to me to be something grandmotherly about a walk in Central Park. The popular consent to the genteel promenade or decorative picnic mystified me as a child and later puzzled me when as a historian I became aware of the boisterous side of 19th century America... To picnic on the lawn, to bask in the sun, to follow the winding path carried stronger meanings than today because the park was the refuge for families exposed to recurrent epidemics, families fighting coal smoke, leaky gas, ever-present dirt and the stink of bad plumbing and horse manure...the conditions under which parks came forth were unique to their age and that neither in mode of organization nor aesthetic are these antique models for the present planning of the city. We approach parks in automobiles, we seek contrast to our planted suburbs, not more gardened spaces; the conflicts and possibilities of our metropolitan bureaucracies are not those of Olmsted's days of gentlemen, speculators, and bosses; our sports and machine models of recreation cannot be contained by even the best organized city park. We are escaping a different city; we are in search of a different Mother Nature.

Professor Warner is laboring under an eloquent misapprehension when he says that Olmsted designed his parks solely for the decorous grandmothersly promenading of his contemporaries, particularly for the slum-dwelling immigrants yearning for the rural landscapes surrounding their peasant villages in the old country. Instead, Olmsted hoped his scenery would delight and refresh not only his contemporaries but fulfill some of the contemplative and boisterous needs of city
dwellers for generations to come. To be sure, many of us do escape our cities by car to seek natural scenery, but this does not mean that we have no further need of Olmsted’s nineteenth-century compositions back home. In fact, Americans still enjoy well-kept, beautiful urban parks just as much as their peasant ancestors. When abroad, they flock to the well-kept parks of London, Paris, and Vienna just as enthusiastically as the local inhabitants. Perhaps, if our parks were all in prime condition and well-maintained and policed, Americans would be as at home in them as they are in Europe’s today.

Olmsted did not have to be prophetic to see the problem of criminal violence in our urban parks. He wrote in his Chicago Parks report in 1871:

It is impossible to make grounds in the midst of large towns which offer numerous places of complete obscurity, safe places of general resort after nightfall. Wherever it has been attempted in Europe or America, decent people have soon been driven from them, and they have become nurseries of crime and immorality.

Accordingly, he designed his parks so that portions could be shut off at night leaving only well-lighted and policed parks accessible until morning. In 1859 when he was in charge of the management of Central Park, Olmsted consulted with the police of London’s West End parks to discover how they handled the crime which spilled over from Dickensian London. Thereafter, he started the training of a force of keepers not only to protect people using the parks, but also, like our National Park Service guides today, to help them enjoy their visits, an idea which only last year found favor with Commissioner Gordon Davis in New York, who created the Urban Park Ranger Corps for almost identical purposes.

Olmsted’s park keepers would have had little difficulty in persuading the public to watch balloon ascensions and parades or to listen to band concerts or to go skating or bask in the sun or follow the winding path. But Olmsted as a park designer had a harder job, getting the park commissioners to purchase vast acreages of potentially valuable urban real estate for park land. It is still difficult for people to understand why some of the parks Olmsted proposed had to be so large. While most special facilities for parks do not take up much room, Olmsted insisted that urban parks had to have “range” as he called it, expansive stretches of meadow or stretches of water fringed by bushes and trees to achieve the illusion of limitless vista to encourage a relaxed, contemplative and meditative state of mind for the park frequenter.

PARKS’ CONTRIBUTION TO HEALTH

In his report to the San Francisco Park Commission in 1868, he tried to frighten the members into realizing that they must acquire ample park acreage to save the citizens from mental and nervous exhaustion brought on by the pressures they endured in business and the professions. San Francisco was losing too many of these highly dedicated and productive citizens. These driven men, he wrote, wrecked themselves overworking and had to retire early from their occupations suffering from premature brain failure and a morbid frame of mind. Regular visits to a park would help.

He told the Buffalo Park Commissioners that their citizens who were suffering from neurasthenia had had an unfilled need to exercise disused perceptive powers such as would be encouraged in the proposed Delaware Park in the northern part of the city (now, unfortunately, bisected by a freeway). To the Montreal Park officials he wrote:

... certain scenery has a tendency to lift us out of our habitual condition into one which ... we should recognize as poetic. Let us say for the time being the charm of natural scenery tends to make us poets. There is a sensibility to poetic inspiration in every man of us, and its utter suppression means a sadly morbid condition. Poets, we may not be, but a little lifted out of our ordinary prose may be often to our advantage ... Wordsworth (only greater in poetic sensibility than any one of us ...) came home from a painful experience in France after its great revolution, sick, broken down, unfit for business. Everything was going wrong with him. His sister, Dorothy, persuaded him to let her guide him into the midst of a charming scenery, and subject himself for a time to its influence; "and thus," says Doctor Sharp, telling the story, "began the sanative process which restored him to his true self and made that blessing to the world he was destined to become."

These terms (sanative, restoring) are not metaphorical. They testify precisely that the charm of natural scenery is an influence of highest curative value; highest, if for no other reason, because it acts upon the highest functions of the system, and through them or all below, tending, more than any single form of medication we can use, to establish sound minds in sound bodies — the foundation of all wealth.

Since this romantic intuition about the calming effect of natural scenery on the mind is at the core of Olmsted’s work, we would do well to examine the theory of it and ponder whether such a purpose justifies tying up thousands of acres of urban real estate today. At first glance, Olmsted’s assumptions about the effect of natural scenery on the mind depended upon a belief in the goodness of nature as the creation of a loving God. Olmsted, himself, was highly selective in choosing natural effects to accomplish his social and psychological purposes. For instance, he found the awesome effects of thousand-foot cliffs like El Capitan in Yosemite Valley and the torrents of Niagara Falls to be belittling and frightening to people — hardly the results he wished to achieve in his parks.

THE IMPACT OF COLOR ON MIND AND SPIRIT

Olmsted selected pastoral scenery for its specific effect on the human mind. These are new confirmations of the wisdom of his artistic choice based on our emotional and physical reactions to the colors of natural scenery which are not dependent upon a romantic faith in the goodness of nature. For example, Olmsted, in his compositions, opposed the use of masses of brightly-hued flowers because he thought them distracting and exhausting to the eye. Instead, his passages of scenery centered on a broad sweep of green meadow or lakes reflecting the blue sky above and the surrounding trees and shrubs in varied hues of green with occasional accent points of colorful flowers appearing as they would in nature. Modern research into the effects of color concludes that for the majority of people, blue and green are the tranquilizing colors. A person in the presence of blue and green experiences a lowering of blood pressure, pulse rate, brain wave activity, and galvanic skin response. The same person seeing bright reds, oranges, and yellows, such as one might looking at banks of flowers,
has all his bodily responses stimulated. To be sure, there were
times when Olmsted wanted to stimulate a feeling of liveliness
and gaiety with bright color. He hoped, for instance, that the
buildings at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 could be colorful
and decked out with bright flags. Instead, to his disappoint-
ment, most of the buildings were of dazzling white marble staff
reflecting the heat and light of the sun onto the crowds.

Recent discoveries about the brain seem to confirm
Olmsted’s belief that the effect of art on the mind was like
that of music. Robert Ornstein and David Galin of the Langley
Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute of San Francisco have postu-
lated that the two hemispheres of the brain divided by the
corpus callosum have different functions to perform and that
one rests when the other is active. The left half is working
when we are busy with linear, verbal, analytical, and logical
tasks at the office and rests when the right is occupied with
holistic, aesthetic, spatial, and non-verbal activities like horse-
back riding, strolling through pastoral scenery, skating or
listening to a concert in the park. We might conjecture that the
nervous exhaustion which Olmsted observed among city
dwellers of his day was caused by their overuse of the logical
and verbal side of the brain and the consequent neglect of the
exercise of the aesthetic and non-verbal side. According to
the latest research, while the right hemisphere of the brain was
exercising its poetic and contemplative function, as Olmsted
intended, the left side, exhausted by business and profes-
sional activities, would be getting a much needed rest during
the visit to the park. Olmsted sensed that we need a balanced
regimen of stimulus or exercise for both sides of our natures.
If anything, our civilization has erred in overemphasizing
the logical and verbal activities of the left hemisphere which we
have traditionally associated with intelligence. The romanti-
cism of Olmsted’s time and the counterculture reaction of the
1960’s were efforts to redress the balance.

Olmsted, like his contemporaries, believed that miasmas,
or noxious exhalations from decaying organic matter, caused
to be found in air-conditioned or forced-air heating buildings
contagious diseases like malaria, yellow fever, and typhus. He
thought that well-drained and planted landscape parks could
thought that it would control the spread of epidemics by lessening the amount
of stagnant water and decaying organic wastes in the open
land of our cities. The leafy trees and plants would purify the
air, blocking the circulation of miasmas. To improve public
health Olmsted advocated cleaning up the polluted Back Bay
area of Boston and replacing the swamp and shallow bay
with the interconnected Fenway, Arborway, Arborretum, and
Franklin Park system. The miasma theory of diseases was
replaced with the germ theory in the 1880’s but public health
was certainly improved by getting rid of polluted water and
sewage whether or not they produced miasmas.

Another justification for park making was that park green-
ery purified the air by adding oxygen. Olmsted liked to quote
Lord Pitt’s remark that the “lungs of London” were its parks.
While park landscape does add a bit to the oxygen level and
absorbs carbon dioxide, most of our oxygen comes from the
ocean rather than the countryside. Trees and plants, though,
do reduce the suspended dust in the air and negatively ionize
the oxygen molecules we breathe. According to the re-
searches of Albert Krueger at the University of California at
Berkeley and Felix Sulman at Hebrew University in Jeru-
usalem, adding negatively charged oxygen molecules to the
air improves our ability to assimilate oxygen. Krueger and
Sulman argue that heavily polluted air in our cities and the air

NOW — PRESERVATION, RESTORATION, UTILIZATION

Today in almost all of our large cities we have great parks
which Olmsted and his firm designed in the late nineteenth
and early twentieth centuries. The most complete listing
of them has recently been compiled by the Olmsted Papers
project and can be purchased from the National Association.
They built them as works of art to enhance life in our cities
with facilities for sports, civic, and cultural festivities, and
with stretches of scenery to tranquillize the mind and refresh
the soul. They were built to be accessible, connected with park-
ways to all parts of the city and to smaller neighborhood
and special function parks. Despite arguments to the contrary,
more and more people think that we still need these great
parks and their connecting links. Many think that they should
be restored to enhance our urban life today. If we agree, we
face the problem of their very expensive rehabilitation at a
time when materials and labor are growing more and more
costly.

Some of the rehabilitation can be done by volunteer labor.
Louisville, Kentucky, consulted the original planting plans at
the Olmsted firm to restore Cherokee Park and received the
first Federal funding for such a project. Now, under the Urban
Park and Recreation Recovery Act of 1978, Title X, Federal
grants are available “to economically hardpressed communi-
ties specifically for the rehabilitation of critically needed recre-
ation areas and facilities . . . including improvements in park
landscapes, buildings, and support facilities.”

Thus, if we restore Olmsted’s facilities with funds now avail-
able, we can have a rich and varied range of activities in our
city parks. The great landscaped spaces we have inherited
from the nineteenth century will then, once again, be useful,
life-enhancing assets to our civilization.

The nineteenth-century parks are not all that we need
today, but they will have taken their rightful place in a com-
prehensive scheme of parks, scenic preserves, green belts,
and all the parks we have added since including vest pocket
parks, theme parks, and more specialized recreational facil-
ties. We need not jerm Olmsted’s parks with motorcycle race
courses, candy cane villages, or statutory, but instead create
new and more appropriate spaces for these more artificial
delights. Also, we must learn from Olmsted’s park reports and
our own observations how to use the facilities he left us.
Properly and sensitively restored and intelligently used,
the Olmsted parks will again be delightful places to jog, ride
horseback, stroll, or congregate. Then they will serve the
gregarious, athletic, and poetic sides of our nature, brighten-
ing our lives and those of generations to come as Olmsted
hoped they would when he designed them a century ago.