Opinion: Listen to Frederick Law Olmsted on the Capitol Grounds

To the Editor of The Washington Post:

Regarding the Feb. 3 Style article “Don’t fence us out”:

Capitol Police want more security around the Capitol. Rather than listening to them, Congress should pay attention to Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted designed Central Park and hundreds of parks and landscapes across the country, including the Capitol Grounds. He was the founder of landscape architecture. But he was also a social reformer who believed that parks and open space are essential to democracy and Americans’ pursuit of happiness.

In 1873, when Congress called on Olmsted to design the grounds, the country had just come through a civil war and an economic panic amid growing immigration and rapid urbanization. The country was faced with social and environmental challenges similar to those we have today: racism, disease, pollution and inequality.

As Olmsted saw it, the Capitol grounds and building should exemplify a nation that had triumphed over deep divisions. In a report to Congress, he recognized the role of the grounds “as a public park, especially during the hot season.” Olmsted believed parks and open spaces could provide people from all walks of life a place to connect and find common ground. We need to listen to Olmsted. If we are to be a free people, the prescription is not more fences — but more open and democratic spaces. For good and bad, the Capitol Grounds are the people’s grounds.

Anne Neal Petri, Washington
The writer is president and chief executive of the National Association for Olmsted Parks.

The Capitol: ‘Don’t Fence Me In’?

Is a permanent fence an affront to Frederick Law Olmsted’s design and “the ideals of democracy that the Capitol grounds represent”? Or must the government “take appropriate measures to thwart attacks”?

Feb. 20, 2021

To the Editor of the New York Times:

“Don’t Permanently Fence the Capitol” is a rallying cry for those who have watched the gradual removal and erosion of public spaces from the civic life of D.C.’s residents and
visitors over recent decades. The Capitol grounds are one of America’s most iconic landscapes. They were designed in 1874 by the noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park. The paths, lawns and plantings were carefully designed to make the monumental building pleasantly accessible to all people.

**Bollards** and policing have already made the grounds less welcoming. Olmsted’s grounds were defiled by the insurrection on Jan. 6. Fencing his design masterwork is an affront to the ideals of democracy that the Capitol grounds represent. They cannot be fenced.

Paul Daniel Marriott  
Washington  
*The writer is an associate professor of landscape architecture at Pennsylvania State University.*

*Mr. Marriott is also a member of the NAOP board.*

---

**To the Editor of the New York Times:**

The United States Capitol Historical Society commends you for your editorial. The Capitol is indeed a “tangible manifestation of the idea that the government is a part of American life.” Walling it off will leave the people on the outside looking in, widening the estrangement so many feel from their government.

Throughout our history every attack on our Capitol elicited initial calls for drastic lockdowns. However, each time Congress found a solution to enhance security without diminishing the openness and accessibility of the Capitol, which so beautifully represents the openness of our society.

In response to the 1998 killings of two Capitol Hill police officers, the Senate majority leader, Trent Lott, explained why Congress must not close off the people’s house: “The people’s access to their Capitol is the physical manifestation of democracy. It represents something rare and precious, something all Americans take for granted. It represents the bond between those in high office and those who put them there. It represents, in short, our freedom.”

Jane L. Campbell  
Washington  
*The writer is president and chief executive of the United States Capitol Historical Society.*

*The USCHS is a celebration partner of Olmsted 200.*