Introduction

Olmsted published the letter presented here in The Century Magazine of October 1886. At that time he was turning his attention more frequently to the preservation of natural scenery. By 1886 the campaign to create a state reservation at Niagara Falls, in which he played a major role, had succeeded and he and Calvert Vaux were about to prepare a plan for walks, drives, overlooks, and structures needed for the reservation. His special emphasis at this time, as demonstrated by his letter to the Century, was the preservation of scenery in cities. Some concerns that he expresses in this letter were of long standing, such as the protection of the valley of Rock Creek in Washington, D.C. A more recent concern was the reforestation of the islands of Boston harbor. In December of the following year he submitted a formal proposal to the Boston park commission for such a program. Olmsted also refers in this letter to his park-planning for lake fronts and harbors in Buffalo, Chicago, Detroit, and Bridgeport, Connecticut. Within two years he would return to Buffalo to plan a large park—never constructed—on the shore of Lake Erie. At the same time he began to design a park system for Rochester, whose key feature was preservation of the scenery along the banks of the Genesee River above and below the city through creation of Genesee Valley Park and Seneca Park.

The author who used the phrase "a healthy change in the tone of the human heart" to describe the developments in landscape taste that Olmsted describes here was the British art critic, historian, and social commentator John Ruskin (1819-1900). Ruskin greatly influenced Olmsted's ideas on aesthetics and landscape art, particularly through his multi-volume study Modern Painters, which Olmsted read with his friends in New Haven and Hartford in the mid-1840s.

This letter, with full annotation, will be published in Volume 8 of the Olmsted Papers series.

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Frederick Law Olmsted on the Preservation of Natural Scenery in Urban Areas

A Healthy Change in the Tone of the Human Heart

(Suggestions to Cities)

This is the term used by a great writer to describe what indolent people would be apt to call a difference of taste, the difference between the "taste" that led to the building of the Parthenon and that evinced in the building of cathedrals, and, again, between the public taste of the period of cathedral-building and the time of the building of—what shall be said?—Our soldiers monuments? Our patent iron bridges?

In the fifteenth century, Mr. Ruskin tells us, the most cultivated of men found delight in scenes of which the chief characteristics were trimness, orderliness, framedness, surface fineness,—sources of gratification that could be so only through a conspicuous manifestation of human painstaking. The water in which they took pleasure was water flowing in a channel paved at the bottom, walled at the sides, rimmed at the surface, continued
and bordered by parallel floral fringes, specimen trees, or hedges. The rocks they enjoyed were any but crannied, craggy, mossy, and weather-stained rocks. They liked best to look on forest trees when they had been trimmed, shorn, and disposed in rows by the side of a road. They disliked all that we mean by depth, intricacy, mystery, in scenery. They liked clear outlines, fences, walls, defining circumstances, scenes fretted with bits of bright color, turf patched with flower-beds, nature dressed on the principles of our drawing-room and garden decorative art. They fairly hated the sight of the disorderly, unconfinable sea, with its fluctuating lights and shadows and fugitive hues. The civilization of our times, Mr. Ruskin thinks, finds a greater pleasure in rivers than in canals; it enjoys the sea, it enjoys the distinctive qualities of mountains, crags, rocks; it is pleasantly affected by all that in natural scenery which is indefinite, blending, evasive. It is less agreeably moved by trees when standing out with marked singularity of form or color than when the distinctive qualities of one are partly merged with those of others, in groups and masses, as in natural woodsides. It takes pleasure in breadth, sedateness, serenity of landscape. If modern art has any advantage over that of the middle ages, it is through its awakening to the value of these aspects of nature and its less respect for the more material wealth of man's manifest creation.

This doctrine is not Mr. Ruskin's alone. Scholars in general have substantially taken the same view from the time of Addison and Horace Walpole down. Mr. Ruskin has but presented it more fully and accurately than others. But if we accept it, what are we to think of the neglect that is apparent at many of our centers of civilization to preserve, develop, and make richly available their chief local resources of this form of wealth? Let me refer to a few examples.

At our national capital, while we are every year adding to its outfit new decorations in marble and bronze, formal plantations, specimen trees, and floral and bushy millinery, we leave the charmingly wooded glen of Rock Creek in private hands, subject any day to be laid waste. Once gone, the wealth of the nation could not buy for Washington half the value of landscape beauty that would thus have been lost.

Again, one of our Northern cities has always had lying at its feet a passage of scenery in which, with some protection and aid to nature, and a little provision of convenience, there might be more of grandeur, picturesque-ness, and poetic charm than it is possible that this city shall ever otherwise be able to possess, though it should increase a hundredfold in population and wealth, and command the talents of greater artists than any now living. No effort is made to hold the opportunity. No thought is given to it. The real estate in which it lies, as yet mainly if not wholly unproductive, is from year to year bought and sold as private property with regard alone to its possible future value for some industrial purpose to which thousands of acres nearby can easily be as well adapted. There is a river running through it, but its chief interest to "the human heart" does not lie in the water. The water is of no small value, yet it might be wholly drawn off to turn wheels and all that I have said remain true.

We have another fine city, a city of some repute for its poets, its architecture, sculpture, music, gardening, its galleries and its schools of art. Liberal, provident, thrifty, clean, it sits at the head of a harbor giving directly on the sea. The harbor has made the city. Various islands and headlands make the harbor. The islands and headlands are thus the life of the city. Following Mr. Ruskin, one would suppose that whatever of beauty lies in them would long since have engaged all the art-sense of its people. But, in fact, hitherto, a
stranger wishing to look down the harbor toward the sea could not find a foot of ground along the shore prepared for the purpose. Once the islands were bodies of foliage. Seen one against another and grouping with woody headlands, they formed scenery of grace and amenity, cheerful, genial, hospitable. But long ago they were despoiled for petty private gains, and the harbor made artificially bald, raw, bleak, prosaic, inhospitable. Each island now stands by itself, as sharply defined in all its outlines as the most mediaeval mind could desire. Several of them are the property of the city and are in use for excellent purposes. It would not lessen but enhance their value for these purposes to dress them again with the graces of naturally disposed foliage; and under a well-prepared system, patiently followed, it would cost little more every year to do this than is spent for an hour’s exhibition of fireworks. The harbor is often more crowded than any other on the coast with pleasure-seeking yachts and yachtslets; all that has been stated is perfectly plain; but the opportunity remains not only unused, but, so far as publicly appears, unconsidered,—a matter of no account.

One of the most impressive (and by its impressiveness the most recreative, and by its recreativeness most valuable) city grounds that I have known, I strayed into by accident, never having heard of it before. This was thirty years ago, and I have not heard of it since; but the impression it made was so strong that being asked for a note on this topic, it is instantly and vividly recalled. The entire value of this city property lay in its situation. Otherwise it was barbarous—barbarous in its squirming gravel-walks, its dilapidated essays of puerile decoration, its shabby gentility; its hogs and its hoodlums. But far below flowed a great river, and one looked beyond the river downward upon the unbroken surface of an unlimited forest; looked upon it as one looks from a height upon the sea.

No matter what is beyond, an expanse of water, as you say, can never fail to have a refreshing counter interest to the inner parts of a city; it supplies a tonic change at times even from the finest churches, libraries, picture galleries, conservatories, gardens, soldiers monuments, parks, and landward outskirts. What is easier than to provide a grateful convenience for such refreshment? Yet if one wants it at Troy, Albany, Newburgh, Springfield, Hartford, Middletown, New London, Trenton, Norfolk, Louisville, St. Louis, Memphis, Vicksburg, what is offered? What was lost for Brooklyn when the brow of its heights was wholly given up to paved streets and private occupation! What resources is Burlington wasting! The wayfarer in Lynchburg may come to know by a chance glimpse at a street-corner that that city holds one of the greatest treasures of scenery at its command; but if he would see more of it, he must ask leave to climb a church-steeple, or, what is better, plod off by a dusty road to a point beyond the city’s squalid outskirts, where the James river will give him undisturbed space for western contemplation. Many such illustrations of the general fact might be given.

But one who believes that Ruskin is describing tendencies of civilized movement rather than stages attained, as he looks over our land, is not left cheerless. Years ago a traveler arriving in Buffalo asked in vain where he could go to look out on the lake. “The lake?” he would be answered in the spirit of the middle ages; “nobody here wants to look at the lake; we hate the continued
lake.” And he might find that two large public squares had been laid out, furnished and planted, leaving a block between them and the edge of a bluff to be so built over as to shut off all view from the squares toward the lake and toward sunset. But lately land has been bought and prepared, and is much resorted to, expressly for the enjoyment of this view. This new public property also commands a river effect such as can be seen, I believe, nowhere else,—a certain quivering of the surface and a rare tone of color, the result of the crowding upward of the lake waters as they enter the deep portal of the Niagara. Is the regard paid to these elements of natural scenery by the city less an evidence of growing civilization than is given in the granite statues on its court-house or in its soldiers monument? San Francisco holds a grand outlook upon the Pacific; New Haven has acquired a noble eminence overlooking the Sound. Be it remembered, also, that at Chicago and at Detroit, at Halifax and at Bridgeport, sites have been secured at which the public interest in great, simple, undecorated waters may be worthily cared for.

Between the two neighboring cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis the Mississippi flows majestically. Its banks are bold and nobly wooded, a virgin American forest. Mr. Horace Cleveland, a veteran artist, a kinsman of the President’s, is urging upon the people of these two cities that they secure the opportunity thus offered for a public ground common to both with which no other city recreation-ground could be brought in comparison. If Mr. Ruskin be right, it speaks well for the health of these two wonderfully growing communities that the suggestion has been gravely received and is earnestly debated.

A small space, it should not be forgotten, may serve to present a choice refreshment to a city, provided the circumstances are favorable for an extended outlook upon natural elements of scenery. This is seen in Durham Terrace at Montreal, the inward as well as the riverward characteristic scenes of which Mr. Howells has described in “Their Wedding Journey.” Another illustration of the fact may be found in a queer little half-public place, half-domestic backyard, from which the river may be overlooked if any one cares for it, at Hudson, New York. Yet another may be come upon at Providence, a public balcony, not more than a hundred feet square, thrown out from a hillside street. A trifling affair, but a trifle that expresses much of public civilization.

For low-lying towns upon the sea or lake coasts, promenade piers will generally offer the best means to the purpose. A simple promenade built with tree-trunks from neighboring woods, nicely hewn, nicely adzed, nicely notched, nicely pinned, without a bolt or strap of iron, with no paint or applied “gingerbread,” built by a village bee, would be a work worthy to be celebrated in a woodcut poem of The Century.

Frederick Law Olmsted.