“The True Purpose of a Large Public Park”

by John C. Olmsted

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen: The movement for a large public park in one of our great cities does not usually originate with what is commonly called the people, but with a set of public spirited, broadminded citizens, who have traveled and read and otherwise have been enabled to form a pretty good general idea of what a large public park should be.

If this same set of people continued ever after in control of parks it would be better both for the parks and for the people, but, unfortunately, it sometimes happens that the parks pass into the control of men who, however honest and well intentioned they may be, have not grasped the fundamental reason for the existence of large parks. Therefore the following attempt at definition and explanation may be beneficial.

The true purpose of a large public park is to provide for the dwellers in cities convenient opportunity to enjoy beautiful natural scenery and to obtain occasional relief from the nervous strain due to the excessive artificiality of city life.

By large public park is not meant one covering more than a certain number of acres, but one large enough to contain a complete natural landscape, where the boundaries will not be obtrusive; where city conditions will not be unduly apparent; where one may stroll over hill and dale, across meadows and through woods, always amid natural surroundings, for hours without twice following the same routes; where one may come again and again without becoming familiar with all its interesting localities and natural features; where many thousands of visitors may be enjoying the scenery at the same time without crowding each other; where those who especially seek seclusion may find parts so remote from the boundaries that even if city houses are not completely hidden they become reduced in the distant perspective to inconspicuous proportions as compared with the foliage of trees and other natural objects in the foreground; so remote that the roar of street traffic is less noticeable than the rustle of foliage stirred by the breeze or than the songs of birds or sounds of insects.

That the scenery of a park should be beautiful no one will deny, but that it should be natural needs explanation. There can hardly be such a thing as absolutely natural scenery in a public park near a large city. Fires, pasturing, cultivation, wood-chopping, the destruction or driving away of the wild animals, wild birds and insects, and the introduction of others, have long since ended purely natural conditions about every large city, leaving at best only a general resemblance to natural scenery. Even if a tract of land is still to be found in a comparatively natural condition while in private ownership, it would not remain entirely in that condition after being properly fitted for and used as a public park.

With these limitations in mind, what is meant by the natural scenery of a large public park may be described as ordinarily either open meadow, open grassy hillsides or rolling ground, open groves of trees with good turf, dense woods, borders of shrubbery, or low woody or herbaceous undergrowth, water in river, brook, pond or pool, and, more rarely, cliffs or ledges of
His partner, Charles Eliot, expanded these sentiments by noting his support for "...a general association, to be made up of all who desire the advancement of landscape art... amateurs, landed proprietors, writers, park superintendents, engineers, foresters, gardeners and anybody interested might become members..."

The American Park and Outdoor Art Association (APOAA) was the outcome of this effort at organization. Its newly elected officers reflected the diversity of interests of the membership: as President, John B. Cattellman, head of the Louisville park Board; as Vice President, L.E. Holden, park commissioner and president of the Cleveland Plain Dealer Publishing Co.; landscape architects Warren Manning as Secretary/Treasurer and John C. Olmsted as Chairman of the Constitution and By-Laws Committee. Over the next 7 years, the membership of the APOAA grew and diversified to include lawyers, teachers and significant businessmen such as Joel Hart of Atlanta and John H. Patterson from National Cash register in Dayton.

With their mission to educate, they held conferences yearly in cities from Minneapolis to Buffalo, publishing the proceedings and papers. By 1904, Charles Mulford Robinson, then Secretary, noted that they now included over 800 members and 50 organizations."We are a recognized national authority, appeals for advice, assistance, literature, legislative influence, coming into the office in a steadily growing stream from all parts of the country. There seems to be no limit save that imposed by lack of money to the good we might do."

Lack of money and the efficiency of numbers brought about a merger in 1904 between the APOAA and the Civic Improvement League to create the American Civic Association, whose purpose was "the cultivation of higher ideals of civic life and beauty in America, the promotion of city, town and neighborhood improvement, the preservation and development of landscape and the advancement of outdoor art." By that time, the urge to create an organization solely of landscape professionals had finally reached fruition. In 1899, the American Society of Landscape Architects was created with John C. Olmsted elected as its first president.

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often unnatural, to maintain turf, can be made far more interesting by planting by the use of low ground-covering plants or shrubbery. It is usual in most public parks, even in the portions that are intended to most closely resemble natural scenery, to plant many trees and shrubs that are not only not indigenous to the locality or neighboring regions, but wholly foreign; and not only this, but purely horticultural varieties of trees and shrubs, often with most markedly unnatural forms, foliage or bloom, are used, not to aid in producing a beautiful piece of natural scenery, but solely because of their individual interest or eccentricities or for their strikingly artificial effect in masses.

The intention in using foreign trees and shrubs, when native sorts would actually be more appropriate and harmonious with the landscape, is generally to secure greater variety and therefore greater interest in detail. This is a worthy motive and may be indulged in if it does not result in sacrificing the true purpose of the park. But the use of foreign or horticultural varieties of trees and shrubs often results in artificializing to a most deplorable extent what certainly ought to be a nearly natural landscape.

Relief from the nervous strain of an artificial city life is afforded in no way so agreeably and conveniently as by a ramble amid the natural scenery of a large park and by the leisurely contemplation of the landscape. There are many workers in the city who suffer more or less from nervous strain, though often they are not fully aware of it. Where a large public park with ample provisions of natural scenery has been created, it has never failed to be much frequented for this purpose and to afford untold benefit to those who use it. Not only are the quiet and seclusion obtainable in the middle of a large park necessary in affording opportunities for occasional relief from the nervous strain of our artificial city life, but they are necessary to the enjoyment of the landscape of the park. Therefore, not only should conspicuous artificial objects unnecessary for the convenient use of the park be excluded from its natural parts, but noisy and dangerous occupations and amusements should also be kept out of, at least, the middle portions of a large park.

When one is seated under a tree, quietly contemplating a beautiful landscape, one should not be in danger of being hit by a baseball or golf ball, or be subjected to the annoyance of boys engaged in some game, yelling close at hand. In order to have the essential quality of seclusion, a large public park should not be attempted on both sides of a railroad or important city street if it is possible to avoid it, for even if the landscape could be made to seem continuous across the gap the noise would almost destroy the desired seclusion of a considerable part of the park.

An extent of natural scenery sufficient to afford the sense of quiet and seclusion so beneficial to the city worker can only be secured where the grounds are ample, and therefore this should be the essential characteristic of a large park. It is the one vital reason for the existence of such a park. No number of small parks can possibly answer the same purpose, however useful and even necessary they may be for other reasons.

We are, unfortunately, too much inclined to spend a holiday in seeking some more or less exciting pleasure. A quiet drive or stroll in a large park, or in the country, with perhaps a family picnic under the trees, would be far more restful and therefore more rational than to rush off by train to some Coney Island pleasure resort, with its various artificial attractions.

Even if the true purpose of a large park has been kept in view during the process of selecting the land, determining upon its landscape features and designing its necessary construction and plantations, it is too often lost sight of subsequently, and there is a marked tendency to artificialize the landscapes of our large public parks.

It is no doubt true that the majority of the visitors to a large public park on a holiday seek some positive amusement and prefer artificial attractions, and that they tend rather to avoid than to seek the secluded natural parts of the park. This can not be justly used as an argument in favor of artificializing the natural scenery of a large public park. This scenery has been preserved or created for an entirely different purpose, and one with which artificial means of amusement, are utterly at variance. It cannot be rightly urged that it is unfair to the majority to use public funds for the benefit of a minority. That argument would apply to every square and almost everything the city possesses equally well. It is not an unreasonably small minority who use and appreciate and especially who benefit by, even if they do not fully appreciate, the more secluded and natural parts of a large public park. Besides, a great many others do not know what is good for them when they go to a park to look for more exciting pleasures. They should be gradually and unconsciously educated to better uses of large public parks and not have their crude demands alone catered to.

Park commissioners should not only understand the true purpose of a large public park, but they should have the courage of their convictions. They should know when to say “No,” in answer to demands for introducing artificial objects and amusements into the natural scenery of the large public parks. This is where park commissioners are sometimes not true to their trust. Instead of preserving a large park in its simple, natural beauty, as a priceless heritage for future generations, they yield little by little to the temporarily urgent demands of those who raise a clamor for a site for something which, however desirable in itself, is as much out of place in the natural scenery of a large public park as a manual training school would be amid the books of a public library or a baseball cage would be in an art gallery.
If it is thought wise for a municipality to provide such artificial attractions, these should be limited in kind and number and be carefully devised. It would not be wise or economical for a city to destroy or injure broad and beautiful park scenery by introducing artificial attractions into it when these could perfectly well be provided in the smaller squares or in special amusement grounds, which could usually be nearer the centre of population than a large park, and therefore could be used by more people more frequently and more cheaply.

It is customary for cities to provide for certain kinds of amusements which are healthful and innocent, and for certain objects that are instructive and entertaining and for some that are artistic and inspiring, and which cannot be or are not usually supplied solely by private effort. Such, for instance, are formal gardens, statuary, conservatories, botanical and zoological gardens, concert groves, electric and other fountains, fireworks and the like; also popular athletic grounds, parade grounds, ball grounds for boys, and facilities for boating and bathing.

From motives of expediency it is sometimes necessary to include arrangements for some of these purposes in large public parks, but they should be placed in their borders, and in such a way that they will do the least possible injury to the more secluded parts of the scenery. Great discrimination is necessary in selecting among these objects those which will least interfere with the primary purpose of a large public park. Those forms of amusement or instructive entertainment requiring large buildings or implying much noise, or which draw large and careless crowds that would be liable to injure the grass and shrubbery and trees of the park, should be excluded. It is good policy to secure suitable lands adjoining a large park which can be held in reserve as sites for public museums, grounds for parades, fireworks, public speaking, baseball and (by flooding in winter) for skating grounds, for zoological collections, for a public conservatory, and so on. The park in Brooklyn is exceedingly fortunate in having two very commodious public grounds adjoining it. It is greatly to be desired that other cities should do likewise.

There is no more important matter after a large public park has been acquired and its natural scenery perfected, than that of protecting it from serious injury by the introduction of buildings and other artificial objects not needed for the convenient enjoyment of the landscape by the people.

If there were a well-established and clearly recognized custom controlling what artificial features might and what should not be introduced into large public parks, such customs would develop into rules of common law. Or if there had been carefully drawn and detailed statutes passed upon the subject, or if there had been a series of decisions of courts as to what buildings and other objects could legally be introduced into public parks, their true purpose would be more clearly understood. It is true, there has been for years a statute in New York State forbidding the erection of buildings above a certain size not strictly for park purposes in any public park, but the principle upon which this law is based is so little understood that a few generous individuals recently had no difficulty in getting a law passed which enables them, with the consent of the Park Commissioners, to introduce a great museum of history into one of the most beautiful landscapes of one of the most perfect large public parks in the world.

The usual arguments in support of this desecration have been urged, namely, that the building is for a worthy semi-public object; that the collection it is to contain will be interesting and instructive to the public, and that the building itself will be handsome, and consequently that it will be an ornament to the park.

If this argument is sound for one such building it is equally sound for others. In that case a large public park is little more than a tract of beautiful vacant building lots which the public is temporarily enjoying as a play-ground until it shall be gradually required for one public or semi-public building after another.

If there is no principle upon which the advocates of the first semi-public building can be refused a site, there is no logical reason for refusing sites to any subsequent projects of a like sort. The bars once let down, there will be a stampede to secure beautiful building sites free of cost for natural beauty, art, botanical and other museums; for armories, normal colleges, high, grammar and primary schools, and so on, almost indefinitely.

Who will be so foolish as to try to raise money for a building site anywhere within a mile or two of a public park, when there is a free building site in a large park which the controlling commission is only too anxious to have ornamented with another handsome building? And if the park commission should hesitate, it is certainly less trouble to get a State law allowing them or requiring them to assign a site than to raise the money to buy a site.

There seems to be a constant, and most pernicious itching among the park commissioners themselves to do something tangible and conspicuous that will mark their administration of the parks, and most unfortunately they usually want to locate some building or monument on every commanding site in the poor, unoffending landscape.

As the Irishman in a scrimmage goes on the rule of "wherever you see a head hit it," so there are some park commissioners, who, wherever they see an ice smooth piece of turf, feel that there is an aching void and they yearn for a statue or fountain or something striking to put in it, and if nothing expensive offers they are apt to fill the gap by ordering the gardener to stick in a spread eagle or some other loud cry in colored foliage plants.