

This article appeared in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2008, Number 28. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

© 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher: hdm-rights@gsd.harvard.edu.

REVIEWED BY JOHN DIXON HUNT

The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Volume 7

Parks, Politics, and Patronage, 1874-1882

edited by **Charles E. Beveridge, Carolyn F. Hoffman, and Kenneth Hawkins**

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

A year or so ago in my landscape history class, one design student groaned loudly at every mention of Olmsted. He was, clearly, for her, an ideological challenge, a lion in her path, an affront to modern design thinking. And in a way I appreciated her position if not her annoying way of showing it. The stature of FLO is huge. With the possible exception of Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, no other landscape designer ever wrote and published so much, just as none enjoys the prestige of a complete modern edition of his works, of which the volume under review is another installment (there are nineteen years of his life still to be covered). No other designer is known or referred to simply by his initials (AJD doesn't cut it). For both preservationists and landscape architects, it must seem as if Olmsted is always underfoot or breathing down their necks, occupying a vast expanse of time and space, of ideas and practice, within the unified States.

This status has been established and maintained largely through the commitment of the Johns Hopkins University Press to publishing *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, sustained by support from a cluster of private individuals and establishment entities — the National Endow-

ment for the Humanities, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the National Trust for the Humanities, the National Association for Olmsted Parks (Olmsted even has his own support group). Volume 7 in this ongoing project takes FLO forward from 1874 to 1882 and covers the last years of his residence in New York City, his reports on the design of Riverside and Morningside Parks and Tompkins Square, his planning of Bronx streets and the rapid transport system, his ongoing work for Central Park and his retrospective meditation on its politics (“The Spoils of the Park”), the beginnings of his work on the Boston park system (Back Bay Fens, the Arnold Arboretum, Riverway), parks in Montreal and Buffalo, New York, the United States Capitol grounds, and the New York State Capitol in Albany. The volume also includes the journal in which Olmsted recorded the political skirmishes and patronage maneuvers in the years leading up to his dismissal from the New York parks department in 1878 and, among other documents, his reflections on federal Reconstruction policy and civil service reform. The very scope of that agenda for only eight years of a career is, as they say, awe-

Book Review

some.

The volume is divided into chapters that cover time periods — sometimes whole years, sometimes only a few months — and each is preceded by a brief editorial synopsis of the events that constitute and justify that duration. The whole is introduced by a clear, exemplary narrative by American University Professor of History Charles Beveridge of the individual projects in the years covered by this volume. My only cavil would be that it is sometimes difficult to turn from his mention of a piece of writing or report to the actual text — cross-references by page numbers would be useful; further, only a dedicated Olmstedian would understand the abbreviation “SS1,” nowhere glossed, as referring to the first “Supplementary Series” collection of Olmsted’s *Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems*, published in 1997. The general index is adequate (though by no means exhaustive), and there is also an index of plant materials, along with a list of textual emendations or “alterations.”

The volume maintains the high standards of editing we have come to expect of this series. And those already familiar with the earlier volumes will know how to cope with the often intimidating weight and detail of its annotations, which are sometimes more than the reader who wishes to read through the volume at one go either needs or can digest, but of course essential in the long term for its use as a reference work. The assumptions of reader ignorance are generous at the very least. But the *mis-en-page* ensures that every document is immediately followed by the notes that gloss every conceivable reference or remark that Olmsted makes, so that in practice the eye may skip over their smaller print and arrive at the next text. Bits of this commentary are not properly up to date — that on 18th-century English landscape design, for instance — while the important gloss on Olmsted’s use of the term *landscape architect* (important because of his dedication to establishing and defining the profession) could have benefited from Joseph Disponzio’s research on the use of a similar term by the French designer Jean-Marie Morel. Illus-

trations are often too gray, and the legibility of some Olmsted designs is hampered by the scale at which they have to be reproduced.

Perhaps the most interesting issue raised by this volume, as indeed in the six earlier ones, is how the historian / reader who is *not* an Olmsted scholar searching for the detail, the cross-reference, the crucial date or contact, will distinguish the forest from the trees. And there is the related question, for the likes of my dissenting student, of what in FLO’s writings remains, unencumbered by historical contingency or stripped of local circumstance, as essential and ineluctable wisdom for today’s designers. I would suggest that half a dozen topics emerge as of continuing significance.

There is, as I already noted, his careful and consistent concern to define and establish the landscape architecture profession. This involves, in its turn, the definition of the key modes of intervention — above all, the meaning and role of the public park in late-19th-century America (the focus of almost all of his professional energies in the period covered by this collection). Related equally to the modern concept of the park, no longer the private demesne of a European aristocrat or landed gentleman, is how the European landscaping traditions established by the early 19th century for other social and economic situations needed to be reformulated (not merely jettisoned). In particular, Olmsted seems to think that his country needs to free itself from the sometimes mindless appeals to the picturesque, though he cannot entirely relinquish either its terminology or its perspectives. But he is also almost ferocious in his attack on exotic horticultural production and its baleful impact on design. And then, for this widely traveled and observant man, there was the imminent danger of a bland and uncritical internationalism, what we would now identify as the homogenized designs of globalized practice. Finally, he seems as much concerned with the future impact of his landscapes, their reception and afterlife for visitors and users, as with defending his designs for their own sake, though he is not shy about mounting a

vigorously rhetorical challenge when his own professional *amour propre* has been threatened. All these themes continue to be topical, central to the profession, even if the answers to the questions they raise have changed.

Otherwise, much will be familiar to the modern practitioner: the designer’s constant battles with clients, especially when they took the form of committees and institutions, the endless reworking of site specifics; the relationship of verbal description to graphic representation and of both verbal and visual to topographical facts, the role of the master plan or the overall concept that would drive all the details and smaller elements of a design, the need to negotiate often naked political agendas, and the opposition of persons who objected to the felling of any tree. Much in this volume — including the content and tone of “The Spoils of the Park” and, necessarily, his “Patronage Journal” — documents Olmsted’s dislike of political chicanery and official malfeasance and their impact on his design work; the amount of energy spent on resisting it was considerable. Equally striking is the patience with which he explains the premises of his proposed involvement in a design, his perception of the need and then his willingness to educate clients both before and during a commission, all of which was obviously grounded in his deep commitment to the professional role of a landscape architect.

Determined to maintain the highest standards of the as yet unregistered or even formally designated profession of landscape architect, he monitors firmly, yet with great civility, the frontiers of its responsibilities, including its modes of cooperation with other professionals (contemporary architects and engineers please take note). He also — though he never expressed it explicitly in this way — determined that the general public (and not just the client) should be educated to the highest possible standards about the role of the professional landscape architect, a responsibility that still needs to be kept in the forefront of professional commitment. He used journalism and letters to editors fruitfully to that end and without stooping to popularize

or dumb down the subject (“I cannot write in a popular way, and I have no gift for public speaking” was his response to an invitation to address a gathering on the mountainside in Montreal [328]). Nonetheless, greater public awareness and understanding of design, properly communicated, would ensure both fuller and more enlightened judgments on work sponsored by special interests and persons not readily answerable to public opinion, and it would enhance the enjoyment of built work by more and more knowledgeable people. The legacy of earlier theoretical writing is often conspicuous: When he contributes an entry on “Landscape Gardening” to *Johnson New Universal Cyclopaedia* in 1877, the prose navigates his subject with a dense and almost francophone set of discriminations, divisions, and identification of prescriptive categories.

“Genius of place” was not an idle or empty phrase for Olmsted. Indeed, with sites like the Washington Capitol grounds, Mount Royal, the proposed layout of streets in the Bronx, or the Boston park sequence (the *Emerald Necklace*), he shows himself primarily concerned with what would be relevant to the site and its anticipated use, what it was in the place that a designer needed to draw out, augment, or even invent, “inspired by . . . elements of locality and occasion.” (357). Relevancy was a matter of firsthand experience and analysis, but also required imagination and creativity, as is shown in his long, thoughtful, and elegantly argued proposals for a never-built resort on Rockaway Point in 1879 (397 ff.). Some of his more memorable prose, as there, is dedicated to adjudicating and melding the different contributions from invention or inspiration and from empirical, scientific knowledge, the necessary collaboration between which is now sometimes more honored in the breach than in the observance.

Olmsted’s attention to the specifics of a site made him particularly alert to the awkward imposition on one place of ideas borrowed from another far way: “I could not be as bold as you,” he writes to William Hammond Hall (designer of *Golden Gate Park*), “in attempting Eng-

lish lawn effects in the climate of California” (50). Or he will insist that *Regent’s Park* in London is not *Central Park*, and that Boston and London enjoy different “social conditions and customs” (195). Two themes absorb him, and they are crucial to the need to identify and elaborate on what is or must be distinctive about North American design, even with acknowledgment of debts and obligations to foreign models. One is his need to establish an adequate “idea” of a park. The other, related, is his anxiety not to be stuck with rehearsing, let alone designing, the clichés of the picturesque. He rightly sees very different meanings of the term *picturesque* in English, French, and Italian, rejecting the mere imitation of paintings (along with their static impositions — “a very unjust [comparison]” and inclining toward the term’s more important emphasis on aesthetic concepts (“an idea of beauty,” a quotation of Andrew Jackson Downing [394]).

As for parks, he was aware of how “the way of the lawn mower has at all points been made clear” (19), though such allowance was relevant mostly for climates where greensward would be feasible (he did, though, also acknowledge the advent of the suburban “hose” pipe). Yet wildness, too (as on Mont Royal or in the barely tidal fenland around Boston), was to be allowed and could be sustained artificially. However, he refused to contemplate the use of *park* to describe his project for the Back Bay, for the Capitol grounds in Washington, too, the “idea of a park, flower-garden, and play-ground is discarded” (96). Parks “properly so called” were, in fact, a wholly new kind of landscape, inspired indirectly by European private estates and the occasional public example like the *English Garden* in Munich or *Birkenhead Park*, near Liverpool, but otherwise the park was a type that needed both fresh conceptual and new formal invention. The designers of modern parks were required to cope with a much-increased and too often competing agenda of amenities, programs, and infrastructures, and each requirement could pull a design in different directions. Boulevards had their origins in French urban planning, and these could be

adapted as parkways for American sites. But “in our own country small parks are more commonly formed around or at least in front of such buildings” (170) as city halls, state capitols, or major cultural institutions, and designs needed to respond inventively to these different conditions. “Efficiency of operation” and “conveniency of approach” (64) were key themes to address, while the relation of public open spaces to the overall structure of the city was a paramount consideration. The general public also needed examples of good taste in landscape design, and this involved ensuring that parkland contained a suitable range of what Olmsted called “counterparts” of common natural sceneries, which could even extend to the establishment of “museums” of arboriculture (76, 175). While he queried some poor efforts by architects “producing certain impressions upon the mind of observers” (36), the reception of new park designs by users and the associations aroused in landscapes were still vital.

Olmsted’s language and writing style are distinctive of his time and class — not least the length to which he would go in explaining his proposals (people in his office then transcribing his drafts). But much that emerges from these pages is of continuing relevance. “[A] park is not wholly a human construction, but partly a growth, and the completion of so much of it as a human construction must to a certain degree wait upon and follow the process of growth” (77 – 78). And, long before he could have benefited from the resources of a computer, he worried especially about how to represent that process and growth to impatient clients, especially those unused to reading plans.

A volume of writings such as this tends to make Olmsted seem something of a generalist, at ease with the large, un-specific statement and the carefully calibrated criterion; yet he was equally adept at articulation of very precise details, a verbal skill that he clearly honed as a means of preparing clients to understand what his graphic proposals contained, a skill that work published in this volume clearly demonstrates. ■