

Elegance and Grass Roots: The Neglected Philosophy of Frederick Law Olmsted

Frederick Law Olmsted is best known for his work in landscape architecture, particularly his creation of New York's Central Park. It is not so well known that his park designs were inspired by an ambitious and systematic philosophy. This essay will trace the development of Olmsted's thought from his early Jeffersonian pastoralism to a new vision of the important role of city parks in a democracy. My aims are to show that: 1) Olmsted was influenced by Utilitarianism and Transcendentalism, but he went beyond them and made an original contribution to the thought of his time that in some respects anticipated American Pragmatism; 2) Olmsted's philosophy of park design and his social philosophy are complementary and inseparable, forming an elegant system in which a few simple aesthetic principles entail profound and wide-ranging effects that he thought would civilize and democratize American society; and 3) an understanding of Olmsted's visionary philosophy cannot only enhance our appreciation of his landscape architecture but also better enable us to grasp the contemporary relevance of his work.

When Olmsted was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1822, America was a rural society in which 9 out of 10 million people lived on farms or in small villages. He never graduated from a school or college, and it was only by a series of fortunate accidents that he was able to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in his career in landscape architecture. Damage to his eyes from sumac poisoning prevented him from attending Yale, so he served as apprentice to a civil engineer and learned surveying. His next job was bookkeeping for a dry goods company in New York, which he found so boring that he took the opportunity to escape by sailing on a merchant ship to China. At the age of twenty-two Olmsted decided to become a gentleman farmer with land purchased by his father, and he studied horticulture and botany, attended lectures at Yale on geology and scientific agriculture, and read widely on nature, landscaping, and aesthetics. He published his first book, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, and edited *Putnam's Monthly* until it went bankrupt. During this early period, Olmsted adopted the Jeffersonian view that the small independent farmer is the nucleus of democracy, but his views changed

dramatically after a tour of England and Europe in 1850 opened his eyes to the rapid growth of cities and their large urban parks, and he began to change his focus from farming to urban reform.

Another important turning point in the development of Olmsted's philosophy was his experience touring the South to write articles for the *New York Daily Times*, later published as *The Cotton Kingdom*. His assignment was to give an "objective picture," but what he found was a considerably lower standard of living than in the North, a feudal economy and rigid class structure, which was as dehumanizing to whites as it was brutalizing to blacks. He became an abolitionist, but at the same time, he recognized the main defect of the northern way of life to be the corrupting influence of laissez-faire capitalism, and he regarded the profit motive as almost as destructive in the North as slavery was in the South. In a letter in 1853 he described himself as a "Socialist Democrat," dedicating himself to finding a solution to the problems of the northern cities and creating "a democratic condition of society as well as of government." Olmsted's first major opportunity to put into practice his vision of social democracy came in 1858, when the design that he submitted with Calvert Vaux for the construction of New York's Central Park won first prize. On the brink of the Civil War, he saw in the park an important and enduring symbol of what could be accomplished without slave labor, "a democratic development of the highest significance and on the success of which much of the progress of art and esthetic culture in this country is dependent" (Fein 1967, p. 26).

When the war broke out, Olmsted was appointed Secretary General of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which later became the American Red Cross, an enormous responsibility that included supplying the Union army and supervising the care of the wounded. After suffering a breakdown, he resigned from the job, helped found the *Nation*, a magazine dedicated to supporting Lincoln's program for abolition and protecting the civil rights of freed slaves, and then moved to California to manage mining estates. Olmsted found life on the frontier to be appallingly lacking in "communitiveness," by which he meant a feeling of concern for one's neighbors and the common good. His efforts to create a stable community were interrupted by the failure of the mine, but he was able to help draft legislation making Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Big Tree Groves into state reservations, setting an important precedent for the national parks movement. When Calvert Vaux persuaded him to return to New York and resume their partnership, Olmsted finally, at the age of forty-three, committed himself to a career in landscape architecture, which was to continue for the next thirty years. The commissions that he and his firm carried out included 100 public parks, 200 private estates, 50 residential communities, and 40 college campuses. Some of his most notable accomplishments, in addition to New York's Central Park, are Brooklyn's Prospect Park, Boston's Emerald Necklace, Montreal's Mount Royal, Stanford University, the Biltmore Estate, the U.S. Capitol grounds, and the Niagara Falls Reservation.

Witold Rybczynski compares Olmsted to Zelig, the character in the Woody Allen movie who shows up at every important historical moment. Olmsted is in the South before the Civil War, a major figure during the war, on the Western frontier, in Chicago just after the fire. "The difference is that he's not a bystander; he's usually in the middle of things and very much involved in them. He's somebody whose life really is also the story of the time he lives in" (Rybczynski 1999b, p. 3).

Two main themes inspired Olmsted's work in landscape architecture — his conviction that nature has healing and restorative psychological effects on the individual and his equally strong belief that nature is a civilizing force in society. Olmsted had held the first belief since early childhood, but Rybczynski's biography dates the latter to his time in California in middle age.

Yosemite opened his eyes to an exciting new possibility: the experience of scenery, whether man-made or natural, could be a powerful *civilizing* force... . The two strands of his thought that had been occupying him for more than a decade finally came together. It is an important moment: he has realized that he might combine his interests in social reform and landscaping. (Rybczynski 1999a, p. 258)

No doubt the Yosemite experience was important, and it is true that soon after making the case that the park should be preserved as a national trust, Olmsted decided to return to New York and commit himself again to landscaping. Nevertheless, the idea that nature has the power to civilize and democratize a society was already evident in his earlier writings and was the primary inspiration for his work on Central Park.

Olmsted believed that nature affects the emotions both psychologically and socially. Fresh air, sunlight, and abundant foliage improve physical and mental health through what he called the "unbending" of faculties that are placed under tension by the pressures of urban life, producing a sense of mental tranquility and rest, intellectual vigor, and a "temperate, good-natured, and healthy state of mind" (Olmsted 1997; 66).

The enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it, tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration of the whole system. (Rybczynski 1999a, p. 258)

He thought that nature's healing occurs through an unconscious process in

which the mind is influenced through the imagination, and he was also convinced that parks in urban areas would help to achieve this effect.

The chief end of a large park is an effect on the human organism by an action of what it presents to view, which action, like that of music, is of a kind that goes back of thought, and cannot be fully given the form of words. (Beveridge 1998, p. 31)

The goal of the landscape architect, he believed, is to enhance these beneficial psychological effects by allowing nothing to interfere with the unconscious process by which landscape moves us.

In order to achieve this goal Olmsted's first principle of design was maximum contrast between the park and the restraining and confining conditions of the city,

those conditions which compel us to walk circumspectly, watchfully, jealously, which compel us to look closely upon others without sympathy. Practically, what we most want is a simple, broad, open space of clean greensward, with sufficient play of surface and a sufficient number of trees about it to supply a variety of light and shade. This we want as a central feature. We want depth of wood enough about it not only in hot weather, but to completely shut out the city from our landscapes. (Beveridge 1998, p. 80)

Within the park the main principle of Olmsted's designs was the subordination of all elements to the overall purpose. He had no interest in the particular details of the landscape as things of beauty in themselves, but regarded them as "warp and woof in brocade." He constructed pathways with gentle grades and curves and eschewed striking specimens or flower borders that would draw attention away from the general atmosphere of the landscape.

A park is a work of art, designed to produce certain effects upon the mind of men. There should be nothing in it, absolutely nothing — not a foot of surface nor a spear of grass — which does not represent study, design, a sagacious consideration and application of known laws of cause and effect with reference to that end. (Beveridge 1998, p. 48)

When he was working on South Park in Chicago, a commissioner asked where

the flower beds would be placed, and Olmsted answered, "Anywhere outside the park" (Rybczynski 1999c, p. 7).

Rejecting the concept of "art for art's sake," he wrote:

Service must precede art, since all turf, trees, flowers, fences, roads, walks, water, paint, plaster, posts, and pillars in or under which there is not a purpose of direct utility or service are inartistic if not barbarous. . . . So long as considerations of utility are neglected or overridden by considerations of ornament, there will be no true art. (Beveridge 1998, p. 38)

His avoidance of the ornamental style in gardening, while opposed to the fashions of his time, resulted in designs that, in the words of Charles Beveridge, "combined richness and wildness of planting with unified composition in a way never equaled in the history of landscape design" (Beveridge 2000, p. 6).

According to Olmsted, the beneficial social effects of communing with nature followed naturally from the psychological. He observed that there is a human tendency to enjoy both "gregarious" and "neighborly" interactions. The "gregarious" mode involves people coming together in large numbers (and being seen to come together) from all classes of society without any competition, jealousy, or pride, "each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each" (Olmsted 1997, p. 75). This may seem self-evident to us now, but in the New England society of his time he noted that purely gregarious recreation was regarded as "childish and savage," because "there is so little of what we call intellectual gratification in it." The "neighborly" instinct, as Olmsted describes it in terms of the pleasures of domestic life, is even more obvious, but the words he wrote in 1870 are prescient:

Consider how often you see young men in knots of perhaps half a dozen in lounging attitudes rudely obstructing the sidewalks... . You see them presently descend in search of physical comfort to a brilliantly lit basement, where they find others of their sort, see, hear, smell, drink, and eat all manner of vile things. Whether on the curb-stones or in the dram-shops, these young men are all under the influence of the same impulse which some satisfy about the tea-table with neighbors and wives and mothers and children, and all things clean and wholesome, softening and refining. (Olmsted 1997, p. 78)

As Olmsted warned in his 1850 book on his English travels, "Do your duty to them, or they will not do their duty to you." He designed his parks with the needs of the poor particularly in mind, always arguing vigorously against the tendency to plan cities with an interest only in the short-term profits of individual landowners.

When he was vice president of the New York State Charities Aid Association during the 1870s he sent circulars to all the doctors and ministers in the city with directions to Central Park by the street railways and a description of the facilities for convalescents. He did the same in Brooklyn for Prospect Park, and in both cities he posted notices in tenement houses and had thousands more widely distributed. In Brooklyn he encouraged an annual picnic of children's church groups that became a tradition and helped to introduce children to the park. (Beveridge 1998, p. 45)

My own view is that Olmsted's most original contribution to philosophy is his idea that public parks are essential to the ideal of democracy.

Olmsted was influenced by two of the leading intellectual movements of his time, Utilitarianism and Transcendentalism, and although he did not accept either one completely, he synthesized ideas from both, along with insights from his own experience, to create an original philosophical perspective. Like Jeremy Bentham, he was a social reformer, but instead of improving society by making its laws and prisons more humane, he sought to elevate the taste and morals of his fellow citizens through the effects of nature, education, and culture. In "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns" he wrote:

Jeremy Bentham, in treating of "The Means of Preventing Crimes," remarks that any innocent amusement that the human heart can invent is useful under a double point of view: first, for the pleasure itself which results from it; second, from its tendency to weaken the dangerous inclinations which man derives from his nature. (Olmsted 1997, pp. 95-6)

Olmsted observed that New York's Central Park had a "harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and most lawless classes of the city, — an influence favorable to courtesy, self-control, and temperance." He would certainly have rejected, however, any characterization of his work or his philosophy as "utilitarian" in the sense of being concerned with immediate practical usefulness. Long before he designed a single park, Olmsted wrote in a

memoir entitled "A Wholly Unpractical Man":

What artist so noble as he who, with far-reaching conception of beauty and designing power, sketches the outlines, writes the colors, and directs the shadows, of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed upon it for generations, before the work he has arranged for her shall realize his intentions! (Fein 1967, p. 427)

He regarded the term "practical" as an insult, connoting the person who is expedient in the worst sense, who would sacrifice excellence to the quick and easy solution. Throughout his career he battled the "practical men" and self-serving politicians of the Establishment. His understanding of the "utility" of his work in landscape design always had reference to a long range vision of civilizing America, rather than to any short-term practical benefits.

The influence of Transcendentalism was also significant. Olmsted read Emerson's *Nature*, published in 1836, which had a profound impact on the cultural and intellectual life of New England during his formative years, and he met Emerson personally while working as editor of *Putnam's Monthly*. He wrote to his father in 1846 that after reading Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* with intense interest, "if any body wants to set me down for an insane cloud dwelling Transcendentalist, because I like Carlyle, I hope they'll gratify themselves. I do think Carlyle is the greatest genius in the world" (McLaughlin 1977, p. 272). The inspiration that he derived from Carlyle's work was actually quite down to earth: "Do the Duty which lies nearest thee." The self-described "wholly unpractical man" led his professional life in accordance with Carlyle's principle that conviction is worthless until it converts itself into conduct. Although he was in sympathy with the idea of the moral value of nature, the seeds of which had been planted in early childhood through his father's appreciation of the beauty of scenery, Olmsted never accepted the Transcendentalist philosophy of nature as a substitute for God. Important as he believed philosophy to be as a force for change, his sensitivity to social problems prevented him from being satisfied with purely intellectual reforms. In order for change to take place in the realm of the concrete as well as the abstract, Olmsted approached nature as a means of serving the public and private needs of the people, rather than as merely an object of philosophical contemplation.

Based upon his readings of the radical free thinkers of his time as well as his childhood experiences with religious training, Olmsted rejected organized religion and any form of orthodoxy that emphasized differences between people and interfered with the development of a democratic society. He wrote, "I am at war with all sectarianism — and party trammels. The tyranny of priests and churches is as great a curse to the country and the world as Negro slavery" (Beveridge 1998, p. 9). He doubted that a "feeling for democratic

values" could be transmitted by churches, "whose authority is not dependent on the untrammelled and honest judgment of free intelligent minds." Instead of looking to religion to reform the world, Olmsted placed his faith in the healing power of nature and the use of human artistry to transform it in the service of an ideal of democracy.

Some interpreters read Olmsted's philosophy as "a kind of pantheism" that sees in nature "an expression of the strength and mystery of the life force" (Beveridge 1998, p. 39). Although there is textual support for this interpretation, it seems to emphasize the transcendentalist element of his overall philosophy at the expense of the utilitarian. On this point it is interesting to compare Olmsted's views with those of his contemporaries, John Ruskin and Walt Whitman. Ruskin was born in 1819, just three years before Olmsted and in the same year as Whitman, but the religiosity of his rhetoric makes him seem rooted in an earlier time. Ruskin viewed nature as a direct revelation of God and described himself as "nature's priest" (Clark 1964, p. 85). He interpreted mountains as

great cathedrals of the earth, with their gates of rock, pavements of cloud, choirs of stream and stone, altars of snow, and vaults of purple traversed by the continual stars, [which] seem to have been built for the human race, as at once their schools and cathedrals; full of treasures of illuminated manuscript for the scholar, kindly in simple lessons for the worker, quiet in pale cloisters for the thinker, glorious in holiness for the worshipper. (Ruskin 1918, p. 56)

Ruskin's strict religious upbringing prevented him from accepting any form of pantheism, and he looked back to older aristocratic societies for his models of social reform. Whitman, on the other hand, had an unconventional and anti-institutional view of religion, which he believed formed the "core of democracy" (Whitman 1982, p. 949). He often seemed to identify God with nature, as in the following passage from "Democratic Vistas":

That something [that fully satisfies] is the All, and the idea of All, with the accompanying idea of eternity, and of itself, the soul, buoyant, indestructible, sailing space forever, visiting every region, as a ship the sea. And again lo! The pulsations in all matter, all spirit, throbbing forever — the eternal beats, eternal systole and diastole of life in things — wherefrom I feel and know that death is not the ending, as was thought, but rather the real beginning — and that nothing ever is or

can be lost, nor ever die, nor soul, nor matter.
(Whitman 1982, p. 988)

Whitman followed Emerson in combining pantheism with individualism. "The ripeness of Religion is doubtless to be looked for in [the] field of individuality, and is a result that no organization or church can ever achieve" (Whitman 1982, p. 964)

Olmsted was more forward-looking than Ruskin, more communitarian than Whitman, and more secular than either of them, but his vision of the relation between parks and democracy is very similar to Whitman's. Whitman visited Central Park almost every day during one period of his life, and he describes his experiences in "the great Central Park and Brooklyn Park of hills" and his observations of the "profusion of teeming humanity" in the city as follows: they "completely satisfy my senses of power, fullness, motion, etc., and give me, through such senses and appetites, and through my esthetic conscience, a continued exaltation and absolute fulfillment" (Whitman 1982, pp. 844, 938-9). Like Olmsted, Whitman defined democracy far more broadly than politics. He wrote:

Did you too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men... I should demand a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, the working-men ... and *not* restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses.
(Whitman 1982, pp. 959, 962)

Olmsted would have agreed with Whitman that America must move beyond feudal aristocracy to

promulgate her own new standard, yet old enough, and accepting the old, the perennial elements, and combining them into groups, unities, appropriate to the modern, the democratic, the west, and to the practical occasions and needs of our own cities, and of the agricultural regions. Ever the most precious in the common. Ever the fresh breeze of field, or hill, or lake, is more than any palpitation of fans, though of ivory, and redolent with perfume; and the air is more than the costliest perfumes. (Whitman 1982, p. 969)

Both Whitman and Olmsted focused on the practical needs of urban and rural life as the way to create a democratic society.

Whitman is recognized as a forerunner of American pragmatism (Rorty 1998), but Olmsted's role in helping to create the intellectual climate in which pragmatism could flourish has been neglected. The main principles of classical American pragmatism in the philosophies of Peirce, James, and Dewey can be briefly encapsulated in two key ideas: we should look to future consequences in determining the significance and truth of our ideas, and we should be open-minded and willing to change our ideas in the light of new experience. More than a generation before Dewey developed his theory of democracy as a substitute for traditional religion, Olmsted had begun putting this idea into practice in his parks as well as in his work as a writer, editor, and social activist.

Immanuel Kant famously said, "Concepts without percepts are empty; percepts without concepts are blind." A pragmatist might re-interpret Kant's dictum by saying, "Vision without action is empty; action without vision is blind." Possibly due to his lack of formal education, Olmsted never doubted that vision and action are inseparable, and his discovery of Carlyle during his farming phase only gave authority to his already well-formed commitment to using knowledge to improve society. His open-mindedness to change is evident in every stage of his career — his switch from the belief that rural as opposed to urban society is the future of America, his about-face on the issue of slavery after his tours of the South, and his design for Stanford, which rejected the plan for a New England-style campus in order to adapt to a different climate, are just a few examples of his flexible approach. Rybczynski points out that as a planner Olmsted consciously avoided trying to control everything, understanding that the cities were "too volatile, too changeable, to be easily tamed." His suburban plans laid down broad rules for public areas but left home-owners freedom for individual expression. "His was a peculiarly American approach to planning, open-ended, pragmatic, and tolerant" (Rybczynski 1999c, p. 7).

The most serious criticism that pragmatists have to face is the charge that their ideas are not useful in the long term. The editor of a recent book entitled *Civilizing American Cities* maintains that Olmsted's social ideas are out of date and that his artistic designs can be appreciated without the nostalgic philosophy.

It is in his descriptions of the relationship of the park to the city that his writing tends to turn into dated rhetoric — and sometimes distracts the modern audience. All that talk about the social, moral, and physical benefits of parklands, though it contains much wisdom, often fails to capture the greater wisdom of his art; the attention to edges, the connections to the city proper, the formal implications of the park thoughtfully spun out and integrated into the design. (Olmsted

1997, p. 17)

On the contrary, I have attempted to show that the "greater wisdom" of Olmsted's art is, in fact, the old fashioned philosophy of making cities work by integrating natural beauty and providing the opportunity for all classes to mingle. The fact that some view Olmsted's edges and other formal features of his art as more important than his larger vision of a democratic society may be a result of the decline of the kinds of neighborhoods that he designed.

My own experience of the effects of Olmsted's parks and city plans is that his philosophy works in exactly the ways that he intended it to do. I have lived for the past 25 years in Cadwalader Heights in Trenton, New Jersey, a neighborhood designed by Olmsted and surrounded by giant oak trees planted under his supervision over 100 years ago. Across the street from my house is Olmsted's Cadwalader Park, which is small in size in relation to his other parks, but enormous in impact. The park gives healing and restorative powers to those who have access to it. In a still very racially divided city, it gives the opportunity for people of all races and classes to gather, and it serves as a crucial center for building community. Unfortunately, lack of adequate transportation in the city limits the use of the park for many residents, a situation which Olmsted would no doubt have deplored. Downtown Trenton is struggling to attract people away from the malls, but there is no linkage between the suburban and urban environments. If Cadwalader Park had been located in the center of the city, and if there were a public transport system providing access to it, the recent history of Trenton might have been very different. Far from being dated, I believe that Olmsted's philosophy is even more relevant today than it was during his lifetime, because he predicted the growth of cities and well understood the problems that this expansion would necessarily entail.

Rybczynski notes that Olmsted was one of the few planners whose ideas lasted more than 100 years. "His ability to see into the future was uncanny." Rybczynski believes that the legacy of his work should teach us, first of all, not to be so skeptical about centralized long range planning. In spite of the disasters of the urban renewal projects of the 50s and 60s, we should plan suburban growth and find a better balance between the suburbs and the cities. He closes his essay, "Why We Need Olmsted Again," with the following words:

Olmsted would be disappointed at the decline of our cities and the increasing isolation of our suburbs. As a 19th century gentleman, he would probably be appalled at our consumer society. "More barbarism and less civilization," he would say. But the practical planner was never one to despair. "So, you have Wal-Marts and strip malls and cineplexes. Very well, there is a place for everything. But that is not sufficient. You are obliged to

create public places among all this private expansion. Places for all people to mix. You must think big, you know. And you must think far ahead. What is it that you want the metropolis to become in 40 years? Because you'll have to start working on it now" (Rybczynski 1999c, p. 7).

It is not just the cities that have lost Olmsted's vision. According to a recent article in *Newsweek* by Arthur Frommer, our national parks are seriously threatened by under-funding and badly in need of help.

The great national parks of the United States — especially the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Yellowstone — are among the crowning glories of our democracy... . But as you walk the mountain trails through these extraordinary natural wonders, you'd have to be unconscious not to realize that they're being deprived of proper upkeep and maintenance. (Frommer 2003, p. 62N)

In spite of campaign promises in the 2000 election to earmark \$5 billion for national parks maintenance, it is unlikely that the money will be made available now that tax cuts are the order of the day. Frommer concludes his article with a quotation from Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Taxes are the price we pay for civilization."

Olmsted would be as appalled by the neglect of our national parks as by the decline of our cities, but he would not have given up. He would say that the solution to these problems is elegantly simple and yet utterly profound. We must create and preserve public spaces for our grandchildren. We must think big and look ahead to the long-term future. Democracy grows, literally, from the grass roots up. I have tried to make the argument that Olmsted's aesthetics and social philosophy are inseparable. Now, if I may be permitted to butcher Kant's maxim about percepts and concepts one more time, I will be blunter: Parks without democracy are elitist country clubs; democracy without parks and other public spaces is impossible, a utopian dream of intellectuals and politicians that will never come true. In July 2003 Central Park celebrated its 150th birthday, and a recent *New York Times* editorial paid tribute to Olmsted and Vaux for creating one of the greatest parks in the world. "Their grand vision went beyond the European model, and not only in landscaping. They foresaw that the rich and working classes alike could find solace within its boundaries" (June 1, 2003).

I have argued that Olmsted was an original and systematic philosopher who made an important contribution to the intellectual and social reform of his time. I have also argued that his thought has relevance today. Although some find his

rhetoric dated, it does not seem so to me. Urban planners and politicians are no less short-sighted now than they were in the 19th century. Our spatial and financial constraints are vastly greater, but the problems are essentially the same as they were when Olmsted was battling for Central Park. Self-interested people do not want to spend money on public works. Why should we? Olmsted tells us why in clear and passionate language that speaks as truly today as it did then. Whether or not we listen will make an enormous difference to future generations.

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