



# Why We Need Olmsted Again

*Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park (above) and many other public spaces, left an unmistakable imprint on the American landscape. Far less familiar are his distinctive ideas about how to shape the American city—ideas that are more pertinent than ever amid today's rising outcry over urban sprawl.*

*by Witold Rybczynski*

**S**prawl is shaping up to be an issue in the forthcoming presidential election. It is easy to see why. The public is concerned about gridlock and the relentless urbanization of the countryside. Existing communities erect barriers to growth, pushing development yet far-

ther out; rural towns feel threatened. There is a general feeling that things are out of control. Yet there is no consensus on how growth should be accommodated. The public is alarmed at the consequences of sprawl but suspicious of the chief means of reining it in—centralized planning.

The public's confidence was soured by the planning debacles of the 1960s. High-minded urban renewal left thousands homeless; cross-town freeways fractured neighborhoods; and public housing superblocks, conceived by the best minds in the field, created high-crime zones. Faced with another round of planning "solutions," the public is right to be skeptical. Yet the suspicion of planning runs further back in time than these relatively recent events. Americans have always been uncomfortable with centralized planning. We admire European cities, but we have resisted vesting as much power in an individual as, say, Rome did in Pope Sixtus V, or Paris in Napoleon III. Instead of the grand gesture we have preferred the generic grid, plain Main Street, and its modern counterpart, the ubiquitous highway strip. This is not simply laziness. These modest planning solutions have generally provided a level playing field for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In the grid, or on the strip, everyone is treated equally. The house stands beside the church which is next to the drive-in restaurant. Each has equal prominence, none assumes precedence over the other.

**T**he history of the planning of the American city has been chiefly a story of private accomplishments and private monuments: palatial department stores, railroad terminals, skyscrapers, baseball stadiums. There is one exception, and it is a big one. During the second half of the 19th century, almost every large city—New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco—planned and built a public park. European cities had parks, but London's Hyde Park or Paris's Tuileries Gardens were relatively small. The American parks were huge: 840 acres in the case of New York's Central Park, more than 1,000 acres in San Francisco, more than 3,000 in Philadelphia. This was planning on a heroic scale.

The majority of those great public works were designed by Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), the remarkable planner and landscape architect who, with Calvert Vaux, built Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and designed parks in Buffalo and Chicago. Later, working alone, he planned parks in Boston, Detroit, Louisville, Rochester, and Montreal. What was it that made Olmsted's brand of city planning so successful?

**O**lmsted, too, lived in a time of spectacular urban expansion. "We have reason to believe, then, that towns which of late have been increasing rapidly on account of their commercial advantages, are likely to be still more attractive to population in the future," he wrote in a paper delivered in 1870 to the American Social Science Association, of which he was a founder. "That there will in consequence soon be larger towns than any the world has yet known, and that the further progress of civilization is to depend mainly upon the influences by which men's minds and characters will be affected while living in large towns."

Although Olmsted loved the countryside, like most of his contemporaries he never suggested that urbanization could—or should—be curtailed. Nor was he nostalgic about the country's agrarian past. He understood the attractions of city life, cultural as well as commercial, social as well as economic. As a young man, enthusiastic about the promise of "scientific" agriculture, he had farmed for a living and learned something about rural isolation and hardship. He had traveled across the South and the Texas frontier writing regular reports for the *New-York Daily Times* before the Civil War, and had no romantic illusions about life in small, backward rural settlements. Although he had grown up in a small New England town—Hartford, Connecticut—he had been

> WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI is the Martin and Margy Meyerson Professor of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *City Life* (1995). His new book, published this summer, is *A Clearing in the Distance, a biography of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Copyright © 1999 Witold Rybczynski.



*A 19th-century view of Central Park's Ramble recalls a Bierstadt painting of the West, but Olmsted's "wilderness" was entirely man-made.*

apprenticed to a trading company in New York and understood that the future lay with the burgeoning metropolis.

Olmsted had spent many years writing—never finishing—an ambitious book on American civilization. He was always concerned with the big picture. Huge cities were inevitable, of that he was sure. The question was how to make them livable, and how to influence “men’s minds and characters” so that civilization would prosper. He was far from sanguine about its prospects. After spending two years during his early for-

ties managing a large gold mining operation in California’s untamed Sierra Nevada, he had firsthand experience of the crudeness and roughness of frontier life. He was afraid that the booming industrial city would likewise brutalize its inhabitants.

His solution was the public park. It provided city dwellers with easy access to nature. That is something that distinguishes the American city park of that period: it is not an urban garden, nor a manicured parterre, nor a fantasy landscape. It is pastoral countryside, sometimes even wilderness. This rural quality is already present in Central Park’s Ramble with its rocky outcroppings, but it becomes more evident in later works such as Prospect Park’s ravines and waterfalls, and the twisting mountain road of Montreal’s Mount Royal park.

Olmsted was influenced by two experiences: the picturesque man-made landscapes surrounding English estates, particularly those laid out by Lancelot “Capability” Brown, whose work Olmsted first saw as a young man; and Yosemite Valley. He visited the valley during his California sojourn, and, as head of a commission to chart its future as a national park, he studied it closely. Yosemite was an eye opener. Not only because of its grand scale—its American scale—but because of the poignant contrast between the rugged cliffs and moun-

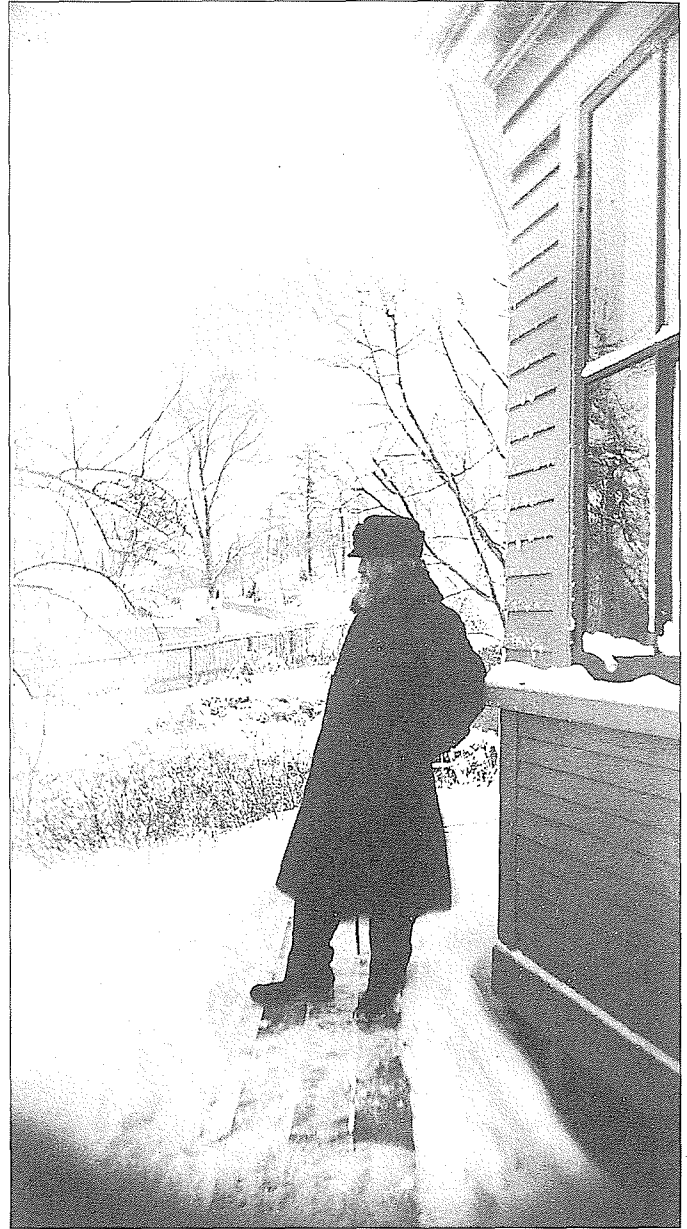
tains and the tame, domestic atmosphere of the gentle valley floor. This contrast became a theme of many Olmsted landscapes.

Olmsted was not an aesthete, and the public park was not only a place to commune with nature. "Men must come together, and *must be seen coming together* [emphasis added], in carriages, on horseback and on foot, and the concourse of animated life which will thus be formed, must in itself be made, if possible, an attractive and diverting spectacle." The public park was to be the great outdoor living room of the city, where citizens would mingle and meet. In a sense, it was a large version of the New England town green that Olmsted knew so well. However, in a vast city, even a thousand-acre park had a limited impact. In response, Olmsted and Vaux devised the parkway—an American version of the Parisian boulevard (and no relative of the later automobile rural highway). The original

parkway was an urban pleasure drive, with traffic lanes in the center for carriages, two broad green treed strips for pedestrians and bridle paths, and additional lanes for local traffic. The 260-foot-wide green swaths were linear parks that gave breathing room to the congested industrial city, brought green spaces into neighborhoods, and created fashionable settings for large residences. The latter point was important, for parkway construction was financed by the

income from new property taxes.

The first parkways were in Brooklyn, stretching miles from Prospect Park to the edges of the city. In Buffalo, Olmsted went further and created an entire park system, three separate parks joined to each other and to the downtown by avenues and parkways (long since converted into expressways). It turned Buffalo, which became known as the City of Elms, into the best-planned city in the country. In Boston,



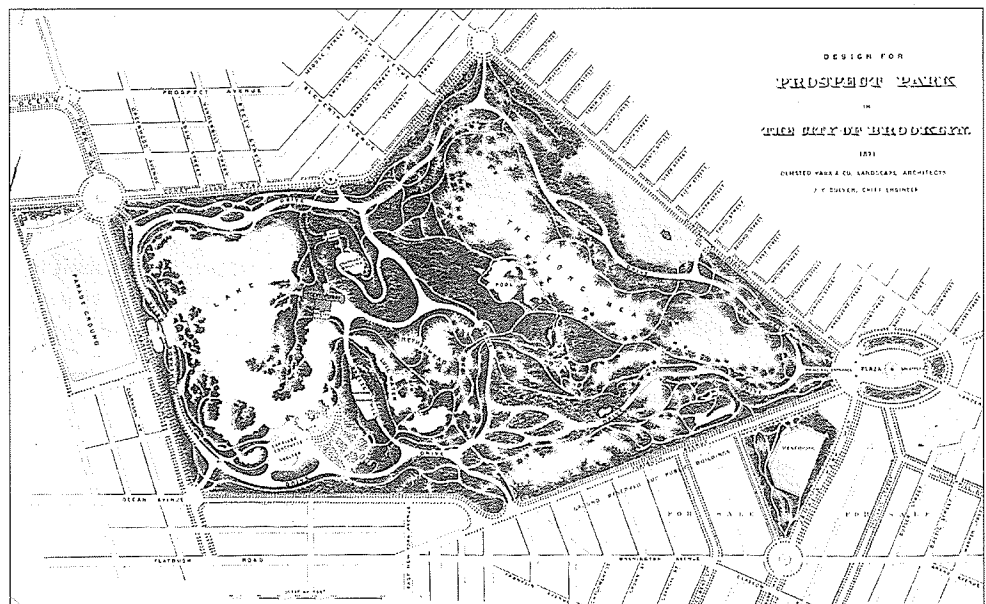
*Olmsted on the porch of Fairsted, his Brookline, Mass., home*

where Olmsted moved in 1881 after he became frustrated by political bickering over Central Park, he laid out his masterwork of urban design, the so-called Emerald Necklace. Nine continuous parks formed a seven-mile-long system from the Common to Franklin Park.

Of course, it was a different time. Decisions were taken by a relatively small, educated urban elite of city fathers and patricians, without public hearings and the oversight of countless private interest groups. There were no environmental impact studies, no experts, no consultants. When Olmsted was invited to Buffalo in 1868 to give advice on the park system, for example, he spent two days visiting sites, personally digging test holes to evaluate the soil conditions. The following day, he addressed a public meeting for an hour, and presented the rough outline of a plan. It was immediately accepted, and he was hired to prepare a preliminary report to be submitted six weeks hence. In the meantime, the park backers petitioned Albany to form a park commission that would issue public bonds. The legislature approved


the project the following year, and work began. With enthusiastic civic leaders, supportive state politicians (the federal government played no role in financing large urban parks), and a public that expected results, these large public works were undertaken with astonishing rapidity. In the case of Central Park, the competition for the design was held in 1858, and by the following summer work was sufficiently advanced that a program of free concerts was inaugurated and daily attendance in the park reached as high as 100,000. That winter, the frozen lake was ready to receive skaters.

New Yorkers still skate on the lake in Central Park in the winter and boat on it in the summer. What is striking about Olmsted's parks is their endurance. Generally, American cities have proved impervious to planning. The City Beautiful movement lasted not much more than a decade after its birth in the 1890s, and, except in Washington, D.C., its grand plans were left incomplete. Today, 40 years after urban renewal, we are



*Olmsted's plan for Prospect Park, in the heart of Brooklyn, N.Y., demonstrates his flair for carving out vast green spaces while preserving the necessary gridwork of city thoroughfares.*

demolishing public housing projects, and some cities have even dismantled urban freeways. The fad for pedestrian malls closed to traffic was likewise fleeting. Yet in the 140 years since Central Park was built, no one has ever suggested that it was a mistake. True, the park experienced periods of neglect, especially during the post-war decades. There have been unforeseen encroachments such as the zoo and the skating rink. There is probably too much automobile traffic for what were originally conceived as pleasure drives for horse-drawn carriages. Rollerbladers and joggers have replaced promenading ladies and gentlemen. Yet while the activities that take place in the park have changed, its fundamental role as a place of retreat and renewal remains. Today, Central Park is as much used—and cherished—as ever.

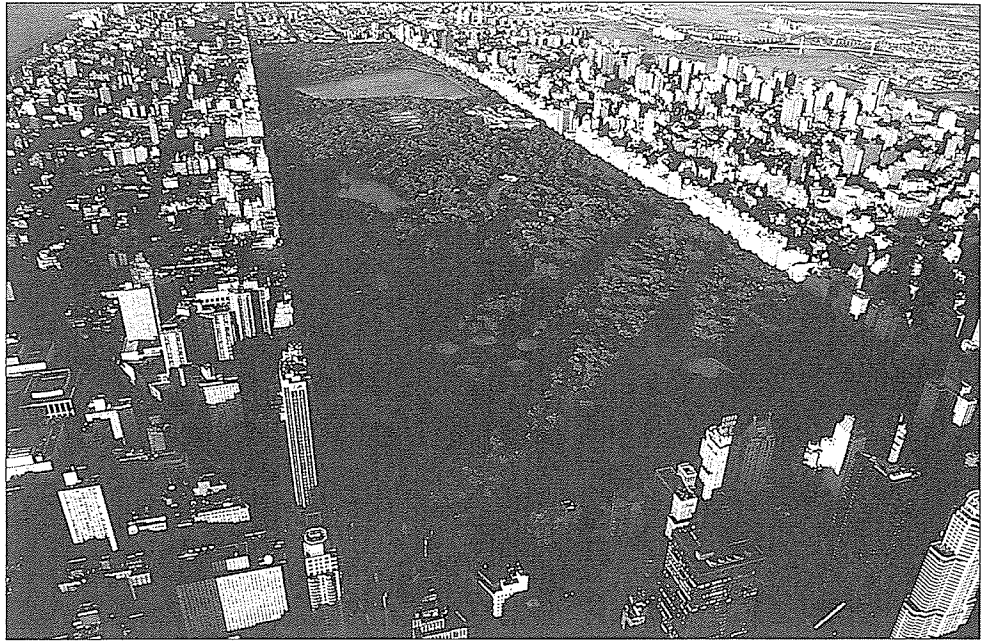
 Olmsted was not merely a park builder, he was a visionary city planner. He planned a new town for the western railhead of the Northern Pacific, devised a street layout for the Bronx when it was annexed by the city of New York, and oversaw a comprehensive regional plan for all of Staten Island. Yet there is no record that he ever designed an “ideal city.” He was not a utopian. That, too, explains his success. Unlike later planners, Olmsted did not try to impose a template on the city. When Leland Stanford approached him to plan a new college in California, he wanted a New England-style campus; Olmsted reasonably pointed out that the arid climate demanded a different solution. Likewise, when San Francisco commissioned a park, expecting a version of Central Park, Olmsted proposed a different solution tailored to that city’s particular climate and geography.

Olmsted could be dictatorial. Once, when he was working on South Park in Chicago, one of the commissioners said: “I don’t see, Mr. Olmsted, that the plans indicate any flower beds in the park. Now where would you recommend that these be placed?” Olmsted’s curt answer: “Anywhere outside the park.” He immersed himself in details, not only cre-

ating a Central Park police but designing their uniforms. Yet as a planner he purposely avoided trying to control everything. He understood that the city was too volatile, too changeable, to be easily tamed. The parks and parkways were big enough to hold their own; in between, he left the ebb and flow of city life largely to its own devices. Similarly, in his suburban plans, while he laid down certain broad rules governing public areas, he left individual homeowners room for individual expression and liberty. His was a peculiarly American approach to planning, open-ended, pragmatic, tolerant.

He regarded cities with the long view of a gardener. “I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future,” he once observed to his son Rick. “In laying out Central Park we determined to think of no result to be realized in less than forty years.” This proved to be a good principle for city planning. His ability to see into the future was uncanny. In the Bronx, he proposed acquiring railroad rights of way well in advance of development, assuring cheaper land costs and more efficient routes. In Staten Island, he advised that residential subdivisions be laid out long before the demand for suburban homes that he felt sure would come. When he was advising on Yosemite, he correctly foretold that the annual number of visitors, which then numbered two or three thousand, would in a century surpass a million.

Olmsted’s contracts always included a clause requiring follow-up visits for several years. The plan was not an end in itself but the beginning of a process. He assumed that, over time, adjustments and improvements would be required. Mistakes would be made. Some trees would take, others would have to be replaced. Unpredictable natural effects would have to be taken into account. This pragmatic quality served him well as a city planner and is another reason, I think, for his marked success in a field where so many have failed. He not only took the long view, he was always prepared to adjust his plans as circumstances demanded.



*More than a century after Central Park's creation, New Yorkers appreciate the prescience of Olmsted's vision. Will residents of tomorrow's sprawling cities have an equal cause for gratitude?*

Olmsted's thinking about cities was not confined to the center. Although he and his family lived for a number of years in a Manhattan brownstone on West 46th Street, he spent the bulk of his adult years in suburban towns: Clifton on Staten Island, and Brookline outside Boston. He liked suburban life and wrote that suburbs should combine the "ruralistic beauty of a loosely built New England village with a certain degree of the material and social advantages of a town." This was the way that cities would expand. "The construction of good roads and walks, the laying of sewer, water, and gas pipes, and the supplying of sufficiently cheap, rapid, and comfortable conveyances to town centers, is all that is necessary to give any farming land in a healthy and attractive situation the value of town lots," he wrote.

**O**lmsted, the Godfather of Sprawl? He did build the country's first large planned suburban residential community outside Chicago, and he was responsible for several planned subdivisions, not the least, beautiful Druid Hills in Atlanta. He assumed—

correctly, it turned out—that future urban growth in the United States would take place at a relatively low density. Yet in his suburban plans he always emphasized the railroad or trolley link to downtown, for he considered suburb and city inseparable. Moreover, his commitment to improving life in the industrial city was absolute—that is why he was devoted to creating urban parks. He may have lived in the suburbs, but he was also a man of the city.

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."