

I Frederick Law
Olmsted,
1822–1903:
Introduction
by S. B. Sutton

I have lived a half a block from his masterpiece, Central Park, in New York City. And though I have walked through it at least a hundred times, I have always found some new place; my most recent discovery was the bird sanctuary. Today I live in Boston, on a street which is part of Olmsted's metropolitan park plan, and I move through some other portion of that landscape almost every day of my life.

As my admiration for Olmsted's work and my affection for his character grew, I simply gave up all efforts at impartiality. Reading Olmsted gives special delight. Olmsted does not hide among his words. One feels his passion, sensitivity, responsiveness, irritation, stubbornness, and optimism on every page. He tells jokes, describes personal experiences, and never fears to insult if an insult can serve his purpose. He has no reverence for meaningless traditions or inappropriate forms, either in architecture or in human behavior.

One must make some allowances, of course. Olmsted repeated himself often in his letters, articles, and books. But this happened because he represented minority causes and could not avail himself of mass media as one can today. (However, mass media have certainly not eliminated more ponderous repetitions!) His concept of the "good" life is dated, for although he rejected formalized religion, he did not entirely escape his upbringing. Yet his gentle humanism cuts through his stylized morality. Olmsted believed, with his contemporaries, in the spiritual progress of man. As a landscape architect he tried, above all, to civilize the city; his parks simulated nature in response to the needs of an urban population. He recognized the necessity of extensive planning to provide for logical development of the city as an environment where a man could lead a meaningful life; and he saw the seeds of our contempo-

rary problems and tried to prevent them from germinating. Obviously, the task was too large for one man.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is easy to see how Olmsted finally became a landscape architect and a manipulator of city spaces; retrospect somehow invests accident with a kind of logic. His beginnings were provincial, and his early life disorderly. Olmsted's father, John, was a successful dry-goods merchant in Hartford, Connecticut, and Frederick was his first son. Olmsted had the consideration to assist his biographers by committing to paper some reflections upon his childhood experiences.¹ In these written fragments, he recalled, with special affection, his father as a quiet, unaffected man who communicated his spontaneous pleasure in ordinary things, particularly in nature, which most people took for granted.

Determined that his son should have the firm, puritanical background that he knew himself incapable of providing, John Olmsted — most likely encouraged by his second wife — placed the child in care of six successive ministers of varying temperament and intelligence. Thus, between the ages of six and twelve, Olmsted's head was crammed with religious instruction that he was forced to parrot back on command. This had precisely the opposite effect of what was presumably intended. Instead of becoming a stern Puritan, he developed a youthful suspicion of orthodox religion. Passed from one teacher to another, he loathed classroom learning at an early age and cherished intellectual independence. His happiest moments came between schools or during vacations when his family took him on long trips through New England or permitted him to roam freely near Hartford, visiting in the households of his numerous relatives, who always welcomed him warmly.

¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Theodora Kimball, eds., *Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architect*, Vol. 1 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), pp. 45-57.

Olmsted should have entered Yale at the age of sixteen, but a temporary eye disorder resulting from sumac poisoning necessitated a change of plans, and he passed the next two and a half years studying topographical engineering with a tutor. By his own admission, however, this period was "really for the most part given over to a decently restrained vagabond life, generally pursued under the guise of an angler, a fowler, or a dabbler on the shallowest shores of the deep sea of the natural sciences."² Thereafter, he continued upon his random course: he worked, bored to death, for nearly two years in a French importing house in New York; in 1843-1844 he made a sea journey to China — seeing a lot of water but little of China; and upon his return he passed several months with an uncle, studying practical agriculture. Meanwhile, his younger brother John enrolled at Yale and, though disapproving of the rigors of conventional education, Olmsted joined him there for months at a time, sat in on lectures, made friends, and generally amused himself.

At this stage of his life — in his mid-twenties — farming attracted him most. His father indulged his whim (which, naturally, did not manifest itself frivolously) first by purchasing a farm for him in Connecticut, and, when that failed after a year, by setting him up on a second one on Staten Island. For some time, Olmsted worked enthusiastically, investigating scientific techniques to begin a fruit-tree nursery, consulting with agricultural and horticultural experts, including Andrew Jackson Downing, and introducing contemporary farming methods to his neighbors. He made landscape improvements around the farmhouse, and his friends praised his ingenuity. He had come to agriculture with a mission to educate farmers and improve their standards, believing farming to be an innocent, spiritually and physically wholesome, useful way of life.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

But the simplicity and regularity that initially pleased him grew tiresome. The farm alone could not satisfy his imagination. He voraciously read novels, horticultural journals, art books, political philosophy, had amiable conversation with friends, and fell rapidly in and out of love.³ He also worried about the purposes of religion. Christian ethics held him, and he believed in God. But Christian rituals seemed to him to bear little relationship to the teachings of Christ or to human experience as he understood it.

In 1850, Olmsted took a vacation from his Staten Island farm and, on April 30, embarked upon a six-month trip to England and the continent with his brother and Charles Loring Brace, a friend from Yale days and later a pioneering social worker in the slums of New York. Olmsted's avowed purpose was to learn something about English agricultural methods, but note the dates of his absence: a dedicated farmer would not usually leave his land during planting, growing, and harvesting seasons. In England, his attention, which he took no particular pains to discipline, wandered; and, for all his good intentions, it is clear he was losing his interest in agriculture as a career. The trip, however, provided the excuse for his first book. He began the manuscript for *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* a few months after his return, and the volume was published in 1852. Here, as in all his writings, Olmsted delights with his unaffected style, and one sees clearly his wit, his perception of the nuances in any situation. In view of his later accomplishments, one notes particularly his enthu-

³ In 1859, Olmsted married Mary Cleveland (Perkins) Olmsted, widow of his brother John, who died of tuberculosis in 1857. He thus became stepfather to four children. He had three children of his own, but the first son died in infancy. In his thesis ("Selected Letters of Frederick Law Olmsted," Harvard University, 1960), Charles C. McLaughlin remarks that Olmsted was jilted by a young lady, ca. 1858, and that his disappointment partially accounts for the relentless energy with which he attacked the Central Park project.

siastic description of Sir Joseph Paxton's design for the People's Garden in the Liverpool suburb Birkenhead.

The publication of *Walks and Talks* and the efforts of Charles Brace brought Olmsted to the attention of Henry Raymond of *The New York Daily Times*, who in 1852 commissioned him to report upon conditions in the southern United States. He thought Olmsted could provide a balanced view, which might offset the extreme pictures of southern degeneracy painted by northern abolitionists, and perhaps help quell the rising war fever. In December, Olmsted began the first of three tours through those disturbed, paradoxical states in the South.⁴ His writings for *The Times* are noted today as among the most sensitive and objective observations on southern culture before the Civil War. The *Times* editors, apparently expecting a more conventional rundown of politics, were initially baffled by his homely observations, but noting the response of readers in both the North and the South, withdrew their objections and let Olmsted do as he pleased.

Whether or not he was supposed to be "objective," Olmsted set out with preconceptions. Brace had brought him to meet William Lloyd Garrison, the fiery abolitionist, and to a great extent he sympathized with Garrison's moral arguments. But Olmsted was more Social Democrat than abolitionist. Though he did not favor the extension of slavery into other states, he did not want to go to war over the issue. Instead of imagining white southerners as monsters, he viewed them as hapless victims of a bad system. In his judgment, neither earnest nor self-righteous damnation of southern iniquities would contribute solutions to the problem. He

⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed., *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, by Frederick Law Olmsted (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953). This is the most recent edition of Olmsted's southern writings.

believed that slavery had to be economically and socially unsound and that if one could demonstrate this theory and present alternatives, the South could be won over to a free labor system.⁵

The slave system humiliated not only the black man but the entire South. “. . . The oppression and deterioration of the negro race is much more lamentable than is generally supposed by those who like myself have been constrained, by other considerations, to accept it as a duty to oppose temperately but determinately the modern policy of the South, of which this is an immediate result. Its effect on the white race, I still consider to be infinitely more deplorable.”⁶ The economic waste and neglect that he saw offended him, and, as a student of agriculture, it pained him that the South should fall so short of its obvious potential. Olmsted despaired over the plight of the “poor whites” whose physical and moral condition he observed to be little better than that of the slaves, and who were as much victims of slavery as the blacks. Slavery had cast a cultural pall, and as long as the system and the attitudes that accompanied it prevailed, the South was doomed to provincialism.

Olmsted's southern trips nourished his disenchantment with rural life. His prolonged absences and his preoccupation with his writing did not contribute to his agricultural efforts. Though he kept his Staten Island farm into the 1860s, he did his last real farming in 1854. In 1855-1856, he joined two friends in a publishing venture, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, which failed, leaving him with debts and doubts. He was then thirty-four years old.

More and more of the opinion that the city was the best place for him, in September 1857 he armed himself with letters and recommendations, applied for, and received the position of Superin-

⁵ For an excellent discussion of Olmsted's southern writings see: Broadus Mitchell, *Frederick Law Olmsted: A Critic of the Old South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1924).

⁶ Schlesinger, ed., *The Cotton Kingdom*, p. 479.

tendent of the Central Park in New York City. By April of the following year, he had become a landscape architect.

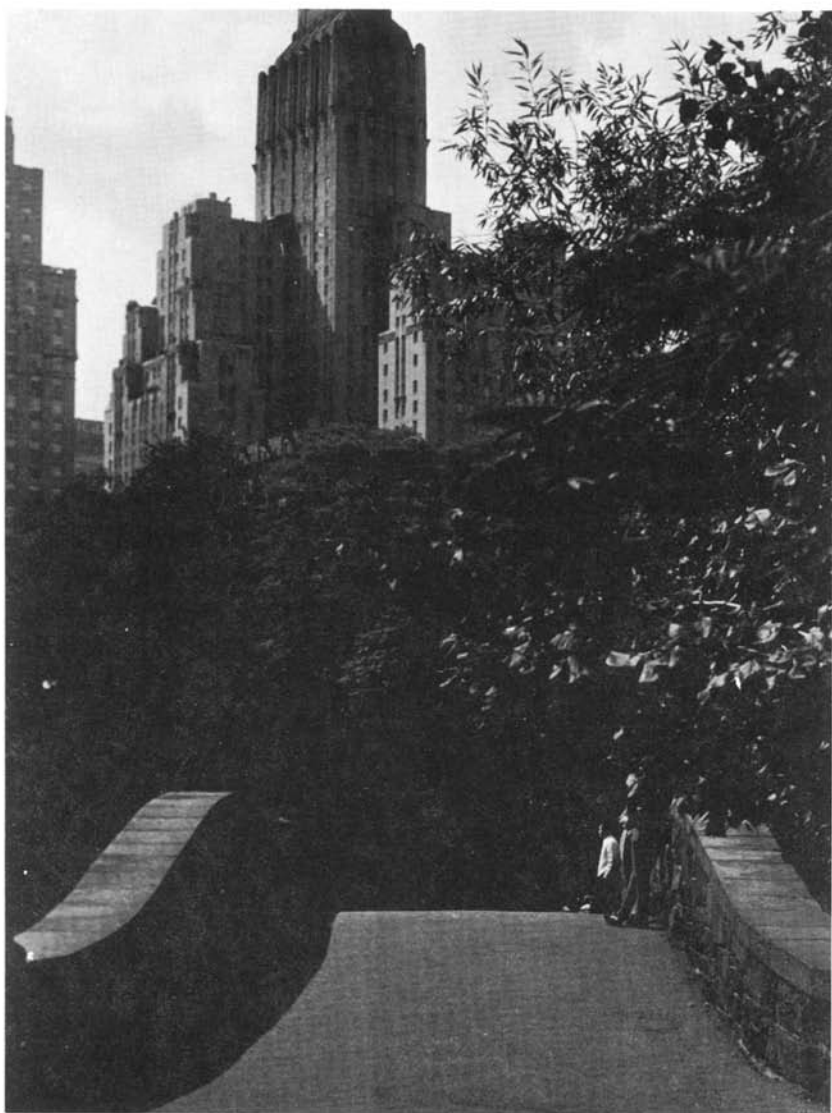
In his autobiographical fragments, Olmsted has referred to himself as a "wholly unpractical man," and he clearly relished this epithet. In Victorian America, practicality was a much admired virtue; in Olmsted's vocabulary, "practical" was an insult. The practical man was the expedient man, in the worst sense of the word. The practical man chose the quickest, easiest solution to any problem, without reference to excellence. In Olmsted's experience, the self-interested politician was the prototype of the "practical" man. From the day he first applied for the position of Superintendent of Central Park until his last major project, the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Olmsted spent a good part of his career in conflict with "practical" men — grappling with the Establishment, so to speak.

Central Park is Olmsted's best-known achievement, and since at least one heavy volume has already been devoted to the history of this work, there is not much point in repeating it at length.⁷ At the time he became its Superintendent, Central Park was a huge tract — 770 acres, including about 150 acres of reservoirs — which the city had obtained earlier in the decade with the intention of creating a public park. It was then, as it is now, vulnerable to political fancies, and it is probably one of the miracles of the last hundred years that a superior plan was selected, executed, and permitted to remain more or less intact.

Olmsted had barely taken up his duties as Superintendent when Calvert Vaux invited him to collaborate on a design for the park area. Their plan, prepared at night and on weekends, and called

⁷ Olmsted, Jr., and Kimball, *Olmsted; Landscape Architect*, 2. See also, Albert Fein, *Landscape into Cityscape* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 47-88.

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“Greensward,” was submitted in open competition and chosen over thirty-two other proposals. In May 1858, the Board of Commissioners appointed Olmsted as Architect in Chief for Central Park. The precise nature of the working relationship between Olmsted and Vaux is not at all clear, a situation that is frustrating to historians. Vaux, an Englishman, was educated as an architect. Andrew Jackson Downing met him during a voyage and convinced him to come to the United States in 1850. Downing was a horticulturist, tastemaker, and proponent of naturalism in landscape gardening in the tradition of Ruskin and “Capability” Brown; during the 1840s, he had been active in popularizing the notion of a public park for New York, but his accidental death in 1852 prevented him from seeing that dream materialize. Vaux, trained in building design, learned landscape architecture from Downing. Olmsted, of course, came to landscape architecture with a background in botany and horticulture, but he had no practical experience beyond his efforts at the Staten Island farm, and one must conclude that he learned the professional crafts from Vaux. However, because of his literary abilities and his missionary zeal, it was Olmsted who emerged as the principal spokesman for their projects; and though he gave Vaux due credit, the latter’s name faded into the background. The two men were partners until 1872, when they separated, presumably amicably. One current historian has remarked that Vaux became bitter, feeling that he had somehow been denied his share of notoriety.⁸

Altogether, it took almost twenty-five years to complete Central Park, and the tensions of confrontations with “practical” men brought the high-strung Olmsted to the brink of nervous collapse on more than one occasion. He resigned from the project five times, but always returned, attentive to every detail, protecting it against

⁸ Fein, *Landscape into Cityscape*, p. 43n.

the frivolities of politicians or amateur do-gooders. In the case of Central Park, as in all his parks, he argued for his design not as art for its own sake but because the park fulfilled the physical and psychological needs of city people.

Long before the New York park was finished, Olmsted — both singularly and in partnership with Vaux — had earned a reputation. Between 1860 and 1865, of course, the country was trapped in its Civil War, and nobody, including Olmsted, was building parks. Disqualified by a leg injury from military service, he took a leave of absence from his New York obligations and went to Washington as Secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission (the parent organization of the American Red Cross), which he helped to organize. Unsure that landscape architecture, as a profession, had anything better than ulcers to offer him, he considered applying for the position of U.S. Commissioner of Agriculture and Statistics. Instead, in 1863, overworked and exhausted, he resigned from the Sanitary Commission and moved to California to become Superintendent of the Mariposa Mining estates in Bear Valley. As the war ended in 1865 and the country returned to a semblance of normalcy, however, he became tentatively involved in advising the city of San Francisco on a park and in site planning in Berkeley for a branch of the University of California. Meanwhile, Vaux urged him to return to New York and collaborate on a park project in Brooklyn. Terrified at the prospect of wrangling anew with political forces, Olmsted vacillated; but he finally packed up his family and returned East. With that decision, he committed himself to landscape architecture and, through it, to city planning.

Arguments between Olmsted and respective city officials recurred with Greek inevitability, and it is quite easy to understand the sources of conflict. The success and popularity of Central Park started a trend, and city administrators throughout the country woke

up to the advantages of open spaces. The land they were willing to purchase and sacrifice for this purpose, however, was usually some site undesirable for commercial or residential buildings, and in no way integral to the established patterns of city life, for example: the Fens in Boston; the mountain in Montreal; the swamps in Buffalo; the marshland in Chicago. In general, the officials adopted simplistic notions of a park, separating it in their minds from the activities of the city. Olmsted's effort was to integrate the two, and his designs spilled over the borders of the sites allotted him. He advised the extension of public transportation facilities, and planned tree-lined avenues to and from the proposed park areas, thus offering the harassed city dweller daily relief from crowded streets, buildings, and the spiritual aggravations of commerce and densely populated neighborhoods. While he desperately explained how the intelligent development of the park, and related spaces and services, would benefit the growth of the city in future decades, many politicians could not visualize anything beyond the next election.

There were happy exceptions when artist and administrators shared objectives. Olmsted and Vaux worked harmoniously with the Brooklyn Park Commission and, after defeating initial tirades against his plan, Olmsted established friendly relations with Boston authorities. Enlightened newspaper editors and important individuals often rallied to his defense and were influential in obtaining popular and legislative support. Olmsted sometimes lost his battles. A group of "practical" men — this time developers, not politicians — turned down his proposals for a seaside park at Rockaway Point in Queens, and his recommendations for the improvement of Staten Island were never acted upon. In many instances, of which the Mount Royal Park in Montreal is a stunning example, the basic character of Olmsted's design prevailed, but

“practical” men permitted the introduction of offensive, small-scale alterations.⁹

By the later 1860s, Olmsted was in constant demand as a designer and consultant. After dissolving his partnership with Vaux, he worked for a while in loose association with Jacob Weidenmann. Later, he took his stepson, John Charles Olmsted, as an apprentice and, eventually, as a partner. In 1883, he transferred his home and offices from New York to Brookline, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston similar in character to the suburban community Riverside, which he and Vaux designed near Chicago. As his office expanded, Olmsted instructed Charles Eliot, son of the Harvard president, Philip and Henry Codman, and F. L. Olmsted, Jr., in the profession, thus assuring an Olmstedian tradition in landscape architecture and city planning for at least another generation.¹⁰ (Unfortunately, both Eliot and Henry Codman died young.) The office handled private jobs as well as city parks. One of the biggest private commissions was George Washington Vanderbilt’s huge estate, “Biltmore,” in Asheville, North Carolina.

Olmsted’s contemporaries recognized and applauded his genius. Universities awarded him honorary degrees, and artists and architects admired his landscapes, though his relations with the latter were not entirely free from anxieties.¹¹ During the celebrations relative to the World Columbian Exposition, for which he had prepared the site plan, Olmsted — by then in his seventies — was toasted, praised, and honored.

⁹ See A. L. Murray, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Design of Mount Royal Park, Montreal,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 26, no. 3 (October 1967): 163-171.

¹⁰ The firm of Olmsted Associates, landscape architects, still conducts business from Olmsted’s old house on Warren Street in Brookline.

¹¹ Perhaps his most serious quarrel was with Stanford White over architectural embellishments that White had designed for Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Convinced that White was spoiling the pastoral character of the Park, Olmsted branded him a fanatic. Charles C. McLaughlin, ed., *Selected Letters of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1960.

Evaluating his own career, he wrote:

I need not conceal from you that I am sure that the result of what I have done is to be of much more consequence than any one but myself supposes. As I travel, I see traces of influences spreading from it that no one else would detect, which if given any attention by others, would be attributed to "fashion." There are, scattered through the country, seventeen large public parks, many more smaller ones, many more public or semi-public works, upon which, with sympathetic partners or pupils, I have been engaged. After we have left them, they have, in the majority of cases, been more or less barbarously treated, yet as they stand . . . they are a hundred years ahead of any spontaneous public demand, or of the demand of any notable cultivated part of the people. And they have an educative effect perfectly manifest to me — a manifestly civilizing effect. I see much indirect and unconscious following of them. It is strange how often I am asked "where did you get that idea?" as if an original idea on the subject had not been expected. But I see in new works of late much evidence of effects of invention — comprehensive design; not always happy, but symptomatically pleasing. Then I know that I shall have helped to educate in a good American school a capital body of young men for my profession — all men of liberal education and cultivated minds. I know that in the minds of a large body of men of influence I have raised my calling from the rank of a trade, even of a handicraft, to that of a liberal profession, an art, an art of design.¹²

Olmsted did not usually invoke art. When challenged by "practical" men, he seldom argued from the position of an artist. No doubt he believed that however dazzled these men might be by the artist's mystique, they could only be moved by the logic of cost effectiveness, real estate values, and, perhaps, social benefit. But note the following agitated passage from one of his letters of resignation from the Central Park project:

The work of design necessarily supposes a gallery of mental pic-

¹² Olmsted, Jr., and Kimball, *Olmsted; Landscape Architect*, Vol 1: 68-69. McLaughlin quotes this entire letter in his thesis and identifies it as one written from Olmsted to Elizabeth Baldwin Whitney, Dec. 16, 1890.

tures, and in all parts of the park I constantly have before me, more or less distinctly, more or less vaguely, a picture, which as Superintendent I am constantly laboring to realize. Necessarily the crude maps which are laid before you are but the merest hints of the more rigid outlines of these pictures, of these plans.

I shall venture to assume to myself the title of artist and to add that no sculptor, painter or architect can have anything like the difficulty in sketching and conveying a knowledge of his design to those who employ him which must attend upon an artist employed for such a kind of designing as is required of me. The design must be almost exclusively in my imagination. No one but myself can feel, and without feeling no one can understand *at the present time* the true value or purport of much that is done in the park, of much that needs to be done. Consequently except under my guidance these pictures can never be perfectly realized, and if I am interrupted and another hand takes up the tools, the interior purpose which has actuated me will be very liable to be thwarted, and confusion and a vague discord result. Does the work which has thus far been done accomplish my design? No more than stretching the canvas and chalking a few outlines, realizes the painter's. Why, the work has been thus far wholly and entirely with dead, inert materials: my picture is all alive — its very essence is life, human and vegetable. The work which has been done has had no interest to me except as a basis, as a canvas, as a block.¹³

In this letter, written three and a half years after work had started on Central Park, Olmsted addressed one of the peculiar and most difficult aspects of his art: the awkward transition between the design and realization of a landscape, a task that requires the landscape architect to project his imagination into a distant future and to be the most patient and persistent of artists. The initial phases of blasting, grading, preparation for drainage, road construction, and planting create a bruised and battered ter-

¹³ Frederick Law Olmsted, Letter to the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park, January 22, 1861, quoted in Olmsted, Jr., and Kimball, *Olmsted*, Vol. II; 310.

rain. Freshly planted saplings appear spindly and hopelessly inadequate. The clients surveying the battlefield tend to get nervous. The politician who has been elected for four years is not easily persuaded by the argument that the park will outgrow this painful adolescence in, say, ten years and will acquire the graces of maturity in twenty or thirty years.

The long period necessary for development made Olmsted's art vulnerable to assaults upon its integrity: encroachments, suggestions for instant showy foliage, land-grabbing, neglect, and well-intentioned but thoughtless architectural embellishments and frivolities inconsistent with the coherence of the design. Olmsted could never divest himself of artistic responsibility. It was characteristic of him to persist in his attention for years after the initial construction and planting of his schemes. He watched over park maintenance and tried to fight off violations of his plans — often at great expense to his peace of mind. If, to honor his metaphor, he conceived of each landscape design as a canvass, it was a canvass of living, growing, changing materials, forever unfinished.

Reflecting upon his art in another context, Olmsted advanced the following explanation in the hope of dispelling popular misconceptions of his intentions:

A mere imitation of nature, however successful, is not art, and the purpose to imitate nature, or to produce an effect which shall seem to be natural and interesting, is not sufficient for the duty before us.

A scene in nature is made up of various parts; each part has its individual character and its possible ideal. It is unlikely that accident should bring together the best possible ideals of each separate part, merely considering them as isolated facts, and it is still more unlikely that accident should group a number of these possible ideals in such a way that not only one or two but that all should be harmoniously related one to the other. It is evident,

however, that an attempt to accomplish this artificially is not impossible, and that a proper study of the circumstances relating to the perfect development of each particular detail will at least enable the designer to reckon surely on a certain success of a high character in that detail, and a comprehensive bringing together of the results of his study in regard to the harmonious relations of one, two or more details may enable him to discover the law of harmonious relation between multitudinous details; and if he can discover it, there is nothing to prevent him from putting it into practice. The result would be a work of art, and the combination of the art thus defined, with the art of architecture in the production of landscape compositions, is what we denominate landscape architecture.

The first process in the application of this art upon any given site, is the formation of a judgment upon the capabilities and the limitations of that site, with reference to the artistic purpose. It is obviously impossible, for instance, to produce in the vicinity of Brooklyn such scenery as will affect the mind as it is affected by the Alps or the Sierras, on the one hand, or by the luxuriant vegetation of a tropical swamp on the other.

Moreover, there are certain kinds of scenery which experience shows to be most satisfactory within a town park, which require an extensive aggregation of their elements. It will be readily seen, for instance, that if all the wood, water and turf, within a certain area of ground, were distributed in patches, strips and pools, however extensive as a whole, and however varied in detail it might seem to those who should thoroughly explore all its parts, there would be no part which would not seem confined, there could be no large open single scene, and no such impression or effect on the mind would be produced as there would be if all the water were collected in one lake, all the trees in one grove, all the strips of grass in one broad meadow. Such aggregations, and consequently the degree of the impression intended to be produced by them, must be limited by consideration for two other purposes: the purpose of variety of interest, and the purpose to make all the scenery available to the satisfaction of the public by ways

of communication. Other limitations upon the artistic purpose, again, are imposed by conditions of soil and exposure, by rocks and springs. How far each of these can be overcome, as by blasting, draining, grading, screening, manuring and other processes, must be in every case a special study, and the artistic purposes of the plan must be affected in every part and particular by the conclusions arrived at.¹⁴

This description, of course, is a modest definition of Olmsted's art, circumscribed by the outlines of the park site. If he had remained within those confines, there would be far less current interest in his work and he would be remembered only by a few enthusiasts as a superb manipulator of horticultural elements. And indeed, he commanded a knowledge of plant materials that very few modern landscape architects can match. (In fact, there was a period during the fifties and sixties when students of landscape architecture learned a lot about concrete and precious little about plants; happily, the trend seems to be changing.)

But Olmsted deliberately extended his art well beyond the circumference of the park. He conceived of the urban park as an integral part of the complex system of a city. It is in 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. Where his words obscure, however, his works speak eloquently in his behalf. Central Park, for instance, interrupts an otherwise monotonous grid, but its edges do not conflict with it; the park is easily acces-

¹⁴ "Preliminary Report to the Commissioners for Laying out of a Park in Brooklyn, New York: Being a Consideration of Circumstances of Site and Other Conditions Affecting the Design of Public Pleasure Grounds" 1866.

sible and makes the grid more readable. In Boston, Olmsted's most sophisticated design, the boundaries have been stretched taut, and the park system has been conceived as a series of parkway links and park joints in the city skeleton. Olmsted's parks never end at their edges. Sometimes by design, sometimes by implication, they send tentacles into the city; they suggest consequential dispositions of streets, traffic patterns, and neighborhoods. Even where later planners or developers have ignored the formal implications, Olmsted's parks often continue to exert influences far beyond their boundaries.

Olmsted was not an arrogant man. He did not propose to plan entire cities; rather he suggested measures that would influence their incremental growth. In the same way that he could imagine a two-inch-caliper sapling as a majestic shade tree, so he could imagine means of transportation, building technologies, and social priorities still unknown to him that would generate their own appropriate urban forms.

Fashion is fickle. It waxes and wanes with far less predictability than the moon. Celebrated as the dean of American landscape architecture by the end of his life, Olmsted later subsided into near obscurity as architects and planners fought to shed the burden of the historic past and fixed their attention upon the International School and other modern movements. That energetic propagandist of a "new architecture," Le Corbusier, complained about Central Park in *When the Cathedrals Were White*, "Central Park is too large and it is a hole in the midst of buildings. It is a lesson. You go through Central Park as if you were in a no man's land. The verdure, and especially the space, of Central Park should be distributed and multiplied throughout Manhattan." But never bashful about contradicting himself, even in the same volume, Le Corbusier also called the park an "immense treasure." The "capital

body of younger men” that Olmsted had educated in the nineteenth century could not sustain his initiatives, and their work fell by the side of the design mainstream. Designers of landscape and buildings embraced the aesthetics of technology and engineering. Landscape architecture as practiced by Olmsted declined as an art.

Still later — perhaps because they had liberated themselves from traditional constraints — architects and planners returned to study the past, to find its values, and to rediscover Olmsted. Sometime in the late 1960s, Olmsted became the subject of a great revival of enthusiasm on the part of professionals and laymen. Many people wished to protect his parks, often under the banner of historic monuments; professionals studied him in hope of finding remedies for ailing cities. And so, through his living parks, his plans, and his writings, Olmsted educates a new generation of women and men.

Olmsted left a colossal written record of his life and career in published and unpublished documents and letters. His heirs donated the entire collection to the Library of Congress in Washington, where twenty-four thousand items occupy twenty-three linear feet of shelf space and are available to scholars. A great deal of that material, including personal correspondence, is still in manuscript form. *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* and Olmsted’s southern writings — and I particularly commend the Schlesinger edition — are readily found in public and university libraries. Olmsted’s printed documents relating to landscape design, however, are somewhat more difficult to locate. The library at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University has what may be the most complete set of these documents apart from the Library of Congress collection.

For the purposes of this anthology, I have drawn only from printed matter.¹⁵ In the hope of elucidating Olmsted's theories and solutions relevant to city design, I have edited these documents in order to reduce overlapping discussions of social concepts and technical or detailed political problems that no longer seem significant. While such a distillation necessarily sacrifices some historical content, it helps to sharpen the focus upon Olmsted's understanding of and solutions for urban spaces.

¹⁵ For further writings by Olmsted, I refer the reader to *Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architect*, edited by F. L. Olmsted, Jr., and Theodora Kimball, in two volumes entitled "Early Years and Experiences" and "Central Park" (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922); and to *Landscape into Cityscape* edited by Albert Fein (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), in which several of Olmsted's reports relating to his work in the greater New York area have been reprinted. *Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.: Founder of Landscape Architecture in America* by Julius G. Fabos, Milde, and Weinmayr (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968) contains reproductions of many Olmsted designs and maps, accompanied by brief explanatory notes.

Perhaps the most pleasing volume, however, is the Sierra Club's photographic essay on Central Park in New York, with an introduction by Marianne Moore. Those of us familiar with the Sierra Club's long record of protecting wilderness areas appreciate this departure from traditional policy and recognize it as a very special tribute to the art of Olmsted and Vaux. David Brower, ed., *Central Park Country: A Tune Within Us* (San Francisco, New York, London: Sierra Club, 1968).