

Frederick Law Olmsted

Democracy by Design

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Abstract

Frederick Law Olmsted, one of New England's native sons, played a significant role in nineteenth-century American politics—as chronicler of life in the ante-bellum South, cofounder of the *Nation* magazine, first director of the American Sanitary Commission (future Red Cross), and designer of New York City's Central Park and Boston's Emerald Necklace of parks. The relevance of this esteemed landscape architect's and planner's ideas to contemporary politics is the attention Olmsted paid to the *spatial requirements* of democracy; that is, he believed the built environment could promote democratic values and behaviors and set himself the task of designing spaces to match the country's democratic aims and aspirations. To be sure, some of Olmsted's ideas are antiquated or simply wrong, but his overarching vision for a democratic landscape—which combines both civic republican and liberal elements—is compelling and provides a thoughtful and incisive critique of our current built environment.

Introduction

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), the vaunted American landscape architect and planner, was fond of explaining how prime tracts of land—areas universally recognized for, among reasons, their aesthetic qualities—were originally the property of the most powerful and affluent families, their beloved “pleasure” or “kept” grounds, before they became the fashionable public parks of the great cities of Europe (Olmsted 1997d, 308). That the lands of some former manorial seats or royal hunting grounds were now the preserve of commoners was a tangible and potent symbol of political change—a remarkable physical manifestation of the cultural shift toward democracy, a

shift inspired at least in part by a revolutionary war fought in Olmsted's America. Olmsted was, however, interested in much more than the movement to build public parks. As a keen observer of nineteenth century American life—pace his travelogues and social criticism describing such disparate places as the antebellum South and the post-war Western frontier—Olmsted identified and wrote eloquently about many of the serious challenges the young republic faced, including the need to assimilate waves of immigrants and to address the economic and social dislocation associated with rapid industrialization. The key question for him was whether the democratic experiment launched in America could be sustained over time, whether America would prove to be resilient in the midst of social change. Olmsted believed that America's success in this endeavor would hinge on the effectiveness of a multitude of civic institutions and on good governance and planning at the local and national levels. But he was especially eager to demonstrate the contribution that creative and thoughtful urban design could make to democratic capacity-building.

To explore, as Olmsted does, how the built environment can assist in citizen formation and contribute to overall human flourishing focuses much needed attention on the political significance of urban design. The conversation about the relationship between physical space and politics in America did not, of course, commence with Olmsted. The founding generation, for example, sparred over the appropriate size of republics: whereas the antifederalist writer "Centinel" built his case on "the opinion of the greatest writers [of antiquity] that a very extensive country cannot be governed on democratical principles" (Ketcham 1986, 234), James Madison urged his readers to embrace an "extended" republic, by which means alone majority tyranny could be avoided and individual liberty preserved (Pole 2005, 53). When Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the early nineteenth century, spatial politics took on a new valence. Tocqueville sought to weigh the effect of America's physical geography on its democratic evolution. He reached the conclusion that Europeans overestimated the impact of "geographic position" upon the "duration of democratic institutions," for South America enjoyed the same propitious setting, yet with very different political

results (Tocqueville 1981, 192-193). The relative success of American democracy, Tocqueville decided, was more attributable to its laws and customs—its habits of the heart. And, by the end of the nineteenth century, Frederick Jackson Turner was wondering what impact the closing of the frontier, the crucible in which he believed each succeeding generation of Americans had been formed, would have on America's future (Turner 1996). With most of his scholarly output and correspondence falling between the careers of Tocqueville and Jackson, Olmsted is unique in that he telescopes the spatial question down significantly, to the "street" level, where the urban landscape becomes the indispensable prop for democratic life.

Perhaps one of the most incisive descriptions of Frederick Law Olmsted's genius comes from his contemporary, Charles Eliot Norton, who observed that, among American artists, Olmsted ranks "first in the production of great works which answer the needs and give expression to the life of our immense and miscellaneous democracy" (Mumford 1971, 40). This essay will attempt to explain what democratic needs Olmsted identified and how—sometimes in words, sometimes in the artful arrangement of soil, rock and vegetation—he expressed the diverse character of the American democratic tradition. Given the complexity of both theme and artist, we will encounter, to borrow phraseology from the realm of music, a number of "variations"—different answers to the question of democratic needs and disparate physical embodiments of democratic ideals. Specifically, Olmsted blends at least three different visions of democracy in his designs and essays.

First, Olmsted believes that in a democratic society people, regardless of socioeconomic standing, should sense that they belong to a community, and he attempts to create civic spaces where this feeling of fraternity can be nurtured. Second, Olmsted links democracy to an even broader concept, that of "civilization." If his thoughts about democratic community emphasize *integration* and belonging, his treatment of civilization highlights the need for individual *transformation* or character formation, a process that involves not only political and social institutions but also the world of nature, especially when enhanced by human design. Third, the aforementioned

republican features of Olmsted's thought—which emphasize democratic solidarity and virtue acquisition—rest on a classically liberal commitment to individual liberty. Whereas the republican elements are more familiar to most readers, Olmsted's liberalism should not be overlooked; both are woven into his art and thinking—each strand answering different needs but together reflecting that grand “miscellany” of American democracy.

The purpose of this essay, however, is not merely to interpret Olmsted's thought but to highlight its value for framing and thinking about the relationship between the built environment and democracy in our contemporary setting. This will entail a process of critically sifting through Olmsted's claims about the democratic potential of urban design. Olmsted, for example, was not sufficiently concerned about the ways parks can function as spaces of social control, and he probably exaggerated the moral efficacy of landscape architecture. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that Olmsted's tireless efforts to preserve national treasures for posterity and to create beautiful and accessible public parks has enriched our democratic landscape—a landscape constantly threatened by excessive privatization and social isolation.

Fraternity

In *Frederick Law Olmsted: The Passion of a Public Artist*, historian Melvin Kalfus adroitly depicts some of Olmsted's contemporaries' attitudes toward American society in the Gilded Age. Men like Charles Norton, Washington Irving, and Henry Adams, to name a few, decried the rampant materialism and individualism of their day and yearned for the moral clarity and civic spirit of the early Republic (Kalfus 1990, 15-16). In a letter to a colleague, Norton bemoaned that “[m]en in cities and towns feel much less relation with their neighbors than of old; there is much less civic patriotism; less sense of a spiritual and moral community (273). One practical response to this perceived communal deficit was to create physical spaces where people of varied backgrounds could gather and interact with one another.

Andrew Downing, the leading landscape gardener of the mid-nineteenth century, urged his fellow landscape designers to apply their craft to nurture a “more fraternal

spirit in our social life" (Kalfus 1990, 278-279). To translate this conviction into reality, Downing, in a series of letters dating from 1849 and 1850, argued for the "necessity of a great Park" for New York City (Blackmar and Rosenzweig 1992, 15). Interestingly, as part of his campaign for a stately park in Manhattan, Downing's *Horticulturalist* published Olmsted's first essay—an article in which Olmsted describes his visit to Birkenhead Park in Liverpool, England. That Birkenhead was a publicly built and financed park (as opposed to being a former aristocratic estate) impressed Olmsted greatly, as did its fostering of inter-class association. "I was glad to observe," Olmsted writes, "that the privileges of the garden were enjoyed about equally by all classes" (Rybczynski 2003, 93). There was, then, a strong intellectual affinity between the two men, and they seemed to share a common social vision. After Downing met an untimely death in a steamboat accident, implementation of this vision was left to Olmsted, among others.

That the promotion of fraternal spirit through landscape design is an important Olmstedeian theme can be seen in his essay titled "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns." Recreation, explains Olmsted, can take two forms: exertive and receptive. Under the first heading, the exertive, one would find "[g]ames chiefly of mental skill, [such] as chess" and "athletic sports" (Olmsted 1997e, 184). By contrast, receptive types of recreation "cause us to receive pleasure or benefit without conscious exertion" (184). The receptive can be further sub-divided based on the size of the group pursuing the activity. Olmsted contends that the desire to interact with "large congregation[s] of persons" is "dependent upon the existence of an instinct in us of which I think not enough account is commonly made," namely, the "gregarious class of social receptive recreation" (185). In Olmsted's own experience, the "most complete gratification of this instinct" was on the promenade of the Champs Elysees in Paris or "upon the New York Parks" (185). Indeed, this instinctual need to assemble and mingle in large groups was specifically addressed by Olmsted's plans for New York's Central and Brooklyn's Prospect Park. An outstanding example of a park element designed to satisfy the gregarious instinct is the Mall in Central Park. Extending from 66th to 72nd Streets, the

forty foot wide promenade, lined with American elms, was built to provide a place for New Yorkers to socialize. As Charles Beveridge notes, areas dedicated to the use of large groups, like the Mall, had to be carefully designed to minimize damage and to avoid interference with the “more solitary enjoyment of natural scenery,” such as are afforded by the many secluded paths that cover the grounds of Central Park. In terms of arrangement, however, the Mall’s placement—at the center of the park—is an aberration. More commonly, according to Beveridge, Olmsted sought to place these kinds of facilities on the periphery, as in Prospect Park’s “Concert Grove” or Franklin Park’s “Greeting” (Beveridge and Rocheleau 1995, 50).

In an oft-quoted passage, Olmsted describes, with manifest satisfaction, the way in which his landscape designs facilitated social togetherness:

Consider that the New York and Brooklyn Park are the only places in those associated cities where, in this eighteen hundred and seventieth year after Christ, you will find a body of Christians coming together, and with an evident glee in the prospect of coming together, all classes largely represented, with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing to jealousy and spiritual or intellectual pride toward none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each. You may thus often see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile...I have looked studiously but vainly among them for a single face completely unsympathetic with the prevailing expression of good nature and light-heartedness (Olmsted 1997e, 186).

What Olmsted captures in this excerpt—the simple joy of human togetherness that can be experienced by a large group of people that is at once marked by its diversity and its common fate—is an aspect of democratic life that is mostly absent in our contemporary discussions of democratic institutions and processes. To find another statement about the delights of democratic togetherness that rivals Olmsted’s in eloquence, one would probably have to turn to the writings of Rousseau, where he eulogizes democratic togetherness—accomplished through recreations like feasting, games and militia drilling.

In small venues, physical spaces more hospitable to a modest compass of human relations—the gathering of family and close friends—social intercourse would be more intimate, would facilitate what Olmsted calls “neighborly” as opposed to gregarious receptive recreation:

[Such] circumstances are all favorable to a pleasurable wakefulness of the mind without stimulating exertion; and the close relation of family life, the association of children, of mothers, of lovers, of those who may be lovers, stimulate and keep alive the more tender sympathies, and give play to faculties such as may be dormant in business or [even] on the promenade; while at the same time the cares of providing in detail for all the wants of the family, guidance, instruction, and reproof, are, as matters of conscious exertion, as far as possible laid aside (Olmsted 1997e, 186-187).

Olmsted’s designs intentionally made room for this more intense (because bonds are tighter and more developed) form of fraternity. Thus Olmsted’s plan for Prospect Park, for instance, envisioned ample opportunity for “several thousand little family and neighborly parties to bivouac at frequent intervals throughout the summer, without discommoding one another (188).

Whether a particular design element was meant to nurture the neighborly or the gregarious form of receptive recreation, the togetherness of family and friends or of a larger body of citizens, the promotion of civic brotherhood loomed large in Olmsted’s moral vocabulary. In his masterwork, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, Wilson Carey McWilliams attributes Olmsted’s “crusade for parks and recreation areas” to the latter’s hope that “citizens might be able to overcome isolation and suspicion” (McWilliams 1974, 475). The idea of fraternity, as McWilliams concedes, is rather ambiguous. Its dictionary definition “proceeds like a rudderless ship, in ever widening circularity” – though that does not prevent McWilliams from offering his own definition, which includes the notions of bonds “based on intense interpersonal affection” and shared values and goals “considered more important than ‘mere life’” (2, 7).

~~At this juncture, we should consider how Olmsted’s commitment to designing urban spaces that nurture fraternity cast light on our current built environment. One~~