

CONTRIBUTIONS OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS -
C. BROWN, INIGO JONES, FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED, SR.

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Visitors to today's grand public spaces often take their design and amenities for granted. Whether wandering through Chicago's Millennium Park, Central Park in New York City or Fort Wayne's own Headwaters Park, most people don't realize they are indebted to a venerable profession that began in ancient times.

The Profession

Before I highlight some of the most noted landscape architects, it's important to understand the profession. Today's landscape architecture field is too broad and the projects too varied to be described by a few simple terms. A variety of often interwoven specializations exist within the profession, including: landscape design, site planning, urban planning, park and recreation planning, land development planning, ecological planning and design, historic preservation and reclamation, and social and behavioral aspects of design.

Today's landscape architecture profession can be traced to the early treatment of outdoor space by successive ancient cultures from Persia and Egypt through Greece and Rome. During the Renaissance, this interest in outdoor space, which had waned during the Middle Ages, was revived with splendid results in Italy and gave rise to ornate villas and outdoor piazzas.

These precedents greatly influenced the chateaux and urban gardens of 17th-century France, where landscape architecture and design reached new heights of sophistication and

formality. For the first time garden designers became well known. The gardens of Versailles and Vaux-le-Vicomte were among the most famous of the early forerunners of today's designs.

In the 18th century, most English landscape gardeners rejected the geometric emphasis of the French in favor of imitating forms of nature. One important exception was Sir Humphrey Repton, who in 1845 reintroduced the formal structure into landscape design with the creation of the first great public park – Victoria Park in London. This design would greatly influence the development of landscape architecture in the United States. The term “landscape architect” wasn't established until 1863, and in 1899 the American Society of Landscape Architects was founded. In the same year, noted landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff assisted Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. in founding America's first four-year landscape program at Harvard University. Nearly 60 universities and colleges in the United States offer accredited baccalaureate and postgraduate programs in landscape architecture. Indiana is one of 45 states that license landscape architects, and Purdue and Ball State offer degree programs.

Inigo Jones

Inigo Jones was the first significant British architect of the modern period, and the first to bring Italianate Renaissance architecture to England. Born in 1573, Jones visited Italy several times as a landscape painter and returned to work as an architect and garden designer. He was best known for introducing the Palladian style of architecture to England. His designs included the Queens House in Greenwich Park, Wilton House, Marlborough House Chapel and Covent Garden.

Capability Brown

Lancelot “Capability Brown” was one of the most famous English landscape designers, and is recognized as a genius of English garden design. Born in northern England in 1716, his nickname came from his fondness for speaking about a country estate and having a great capability for improvement. He described himself as a placemaker, not a landscape gardener. It wasn’t until the 1800s that landscape gardening became a trade name.

Brown’s young career was jumpstarted when he was employed by Viscount Cobham at Stowe. This gave him the opportunity of working with William Kent and Sir John Vanbrugh, two noted English architects of that era. In 1764 Brown was appointed Master Gardener at Hampton Court. His practice expanded rapidly and he was often away on coach tours. Some of his better known works include Trentham Gardens, Warwick House, Moor Park in Hertfordshire and Petworth House Garden. Many examples of his work are open to the public. Over 200 years after his death the evidence of Brown’s work is still remarkably extensive. And despite later alterations his mark upon the English countryside remains unmistakable. It was said that Brown’s work was so close to nature as to be virtually indistinguishable as his landscapes grew steadily toward maturity. This slow maturing process emphasizes the foresight with which Brown’s landscapes were conceived, but also reflects the self-confidence and long-term assurance of both Brown and his patrons.

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. was the father of landscape architecture in America. Born in 1822 in Connecticut, he was the eighth generation of his family to live in that city. He attended Yale College and spent the next 20 years gathering experiences from a variety of endeavors he eventually utilized in creating the profession of landscape architecture. He studied surveying, engineering, chemistry and scientific farming, traveled to China for a year, and ran a farm on Staten Island. In 1850 he took a six-month walking tour of Europe and the British Isles, during which he saw numerous parks and private estates. In 1852 he published his first book, "Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England." His close interest in a recently laid-out park in Birkenhead is shown in the detail that he recorded: the width of the carriage roads and borders; the mechanics of excavating lakes and draining the ground; the surfacing of the paths and details of planting – all preserved to be consulted in the future.

Overriding all his impressions was the central social issue for which his enthusiasm and admiration were unreserved, using his own words: "and all this magnificent pleasure ground is entirely, unreservedly, and forever the people's own. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British Queen."

Olmsted's life moved in a new direction in a casual meeting with Calvert Vaux. Vaux was an English architect, whose partner, Andrew Jackson Downing, called for a great park in New York City. But Downing died soon after his 1851 initial efforts to create interest in a park. Had he lived, Downing would have been a logical choice to design Central Park, likely in collaboration with Calvert Vaux. Vaux moved to New York City and played a significant role in

convincing the park commissioners to hold a design competition. Vaux had previously met Olmsted at Downing's home, and he proposed that they enter the competition together. Olmsted was now superintendent of the park at the same time that its commissioners decided to hold the competition. In his role with the park, Olmsted had gained a detailed knowledge of the site, while Vaux had valuable experience as an architect and landscape gardener. The 600-acre site was an unimproved area that was a constant source of political bickering. Olmsted accepted Vaux's offer, and through the winter of 1857-58, they labored over their plan, gradually developing solutions to the design problems posed by the site. In April 1858 they won the competition.

Olmsted and Vaux's design combined social priorities with quality of landscape and a thorough understanding of the practical requirements of a big city. In sinking the essential arterial roads out of sight, they enabled commercial traffic to cross unimpeded by slower park traffic on the smaller surface roads, and in this way emphasized the park's status as the city's focal point while retaining its atmosphere and looking to the future of greatly increased traffic volume. The overall plan for the park was clearly influenced by the natural style of gardening that both Vaux and Olmsted had studied in England, but the varied design and planting for the different areas was also carefully worked out so as to make the best of the extremely poor terrain with its rocky outcrops and hollows. The result, with its reservoirs, tree plantings and wide spaces of open lawn, was – in America – as innovative a piece of city planning as landscape design.

Early Days

When Vaux led Olmsted into the practice of landscape architecture in 1858, the profession in this country was embryonic. The tradition was small and the term “landscape architect” was not yet in use. Landscape gardening was the accepted one. Its practitioners concerned themselves with the embellishment of country seats and suburban residences, laying out grounds around public buildings and the development of rural cemeteries.

Vaux and Olmsted redefined the landscape profession. They advanced it from a polite art oriented to horticulture, to an exacting professional discipline embracing various aspects of the arrangements of land for human use and enjoyment. With the award of Central Park in tough competition, Vaux and Olmsted stood at the beginning of the life work that was to raise them and their calling to a recognized professional standing. Olmsted understood that the Central Park award made the benefits of this project available not to a privileged few but to all citizens.

The park received wide and warm public appreciation from the beginning. The throng who entered it at varying seasons to ride, drive, ice skate or boat, attend semi-weekly band concerts, or walk on its footpaths proved its success and immediate influence on the habits of a large population that had never before had opportunity for such recreations. But it would take over 40 years of slow growth before the park would realize its designers’ vision. For the first time the word “park” appeared in the American encyclopedia. And Olmsted wrote the article for the 1861 edition of the New American Encyclopedia.

While Olmsted considered his responsibility for the park's success indivisible from Vaux's, other aspects he held to be almost exclusively his own. "As to the organization and management of the work," Olmsted wrote, "I think it more creditable to me than anything I have done publicly." His skillful training of the public in the use of the park had confounded those who had predicted it would be overrun with ruffians and unfit for women and children. As the design took shape on the ground and one section after another was opened for use, the role of park keepers and police assumed great importance. Carefully selected and trained by Olmsted, they were required to perform their duties courteously. The public was encouraged from the beginning of Olmsted's tenure as architect-in-chief to treat the park and its users with respect.

Olmsted was a visionary in park development in the United States. He thought the heightened interest in parks came from an accelerated instinct of self-preservation. While Olmsted didn't hate cities, he hated barbarism. When large numbers of people gathered in cities, he recognized that many of the graces of civilization could be enjoyed. But he believed parks had a powerful countervailing influence over the evils of urban living: vice, crime and disease. They helped offset the physical ill effects of a city's congestion and noise and provided a soothing influence. They gave people of all classes the opportunity to meet in casual friendliness, to come together with a common purpose, helping to foster greater happiness of all who used the parks.

Despite their combined successes, the relationship between Olmsted and Vaux started to deteriorate. The partners had always argued intensely. The misunderstanding that had arisen between them over Olmsted's title of architect-in-chief for Central Park exposed a weak

spot in their friendship. In 1872, the partnership was terminated and the men went their separate ways.

Just as Central Park was the public work with which Olmsted was closely associated during the first 20 years of his career in landscape architecture, the Boston park system was the project to which he and his firm devoted continuous attention over his last 20 years of practice.

The city of Boston established a park commission in 1875, and from the beginning it sought Olmsted's advice. The Emerald Necklace was the name given to a chain of parks Olmsted created in Boston. These included Back Bay Fens, the Riverway, Olmsted Park, Jamaica Pond, Arnold Arboretum and Franklin Park. The first project the commissioners were authorized to undertake was a park in the Back Bay area. But Olmsted had not been comfortable with the idea of creating a highly finished and decorative park on the mudflats and marsh of the proposed Back Bay site, which he called Back Bay Fens. A mill company's dam basin became an increasingly noxious open sewer, particularly at low tide. Even then, pollution was a major problem in most urban settings, and Bostonians demanded a solution.

Olmsted's plan was to flush out the stagnant waterway and add naturalistic plantings to emulate the original tidal marsh ecology of the Fenway area. His plan was true to both the character of the land and needs of a growing population. The solution was to make gradually shelving banks and to construct wide islands only slightly above the usual water level. These were planted with cattails, sedges and other marsh vegetation. In flood conditions 50 acres would be covered by water, but the plantings would slow the development of surf. The water in the basin would be extremely high only at high tide on the river, after which a gate would allow the water level to fall as the ebb tide drained the river. Since storm water in the basin

would be mostly fresh rainwater, Olmsted felt that a variety of hardy shrubs could survive on its edge.

These considerations formed the basis of his opposition to creating a formal park in the Back Bay Fens. The landscape effect of the Fens depended on elements of scenery and vegetation that required a natural appearance. There would be no nicely kept turf or flower gardens. This design approach was consistent with Olmsted's belief that a given design have a single leading motive. And while Bostonians loved the floral displays in the Boston Public Garden, they wouldn't be found in the Back Bay Fens.

A footnote on the Fens plan: Seven years after Olmsted's death in 1903, the damming of the Charles River changed the water from brackish to fresh, rendering many plantings unsupportable. Only two of the original bridges in the park's general boundaries and some early trees remain of Olmsted's design.

Olmsted then turned his attention to the recreational potential of the site. The city council had demanded that public streets should circle the area, so he designed a system of walks, drives and bridle paths around it. For the basin itself his design was ideal for waterfowl. While boating and picnicking might interfere with wildlife, he still wanted some recreational activity. So he designed a system of launches that made the three-mile circuit of the basin in half an hour, which would meet the public's need without destroying the habitat for wildlife.

The next link in the Emerald Necklace was the Muddy River valley between Back Bay and Jamaica Pond. This project gave Olmsted his first opportunity to preserve the streamways in the midst of built-up areas. The visual solution to the problem of such a river was burying it in an expensive underground conduit. This would be a long-term project, and in the meantime

the valley would become more obnoxious, retarding residential development. His plan went through years of revision, but by the early 1890s the concept for the entire distance from the Fens to Jamaica Pond had fully evolved. Olmsted made the river follow a more gracious and sinuous course. He planned a 90-foot-wide public way that continued the walk, drive and ride system of his Back Bay design. On the other bank he allowed more space for planting along the walks and drives. Between Jamaica Pond and Franklin Park, Olmsted extended the walk, ride and drive system by means of the Arborway, a multi-landed parkway.

Jamaica Pond, the next link of Olmsted's plan, is a pure glacier kettle hole. Its 70 acres is the largest standing body of water in the Emerald Necklace. Few alternatives were needed to improve upon this natural feature. Olmsted saved much of the existing vegetation and framed the sheet of water with tree groupings, shrubs and pathways. Today, the boathouse at Jamaica Pond provides facilities for sailing, and joggers and dog walkers can utilize the beautiful path around the pond.

The most important public space along the Arborway was the Arnold Arboretum. Harvard University established the arboretum in 1874, and Olmsted's help was requested to design a scientific collection with a parklike treatment. While the land and funds available were severely limited, Olmsted's solution was for the university to transfer its 120 acres to the city of Boston; in return the city would lease that land plus 40 adjoining acres to the university for 1,000 years at a nominal fee. The city would build a drive and walk through the grounds and provide police protection and water. In turn, the university would open the arboretum to the public. Design and construction started in 1882.

The one space in the Emerald Necklace that Olmsted was willing to call a park was the 500-acre Franklin Park. Named after Benjamin Franklin, the park ultimately brought together rural scenery, a woodland preserve, and an area for active recreation and sports. The park has 6 miles of roads and 15 miles of pedestrian and bridle paths to explore. Aware of the concern of Boston taxpayers that the park would be expensive and extravagant, he made simplicity the key element of his design approach. As he had done with the Back Bay Fens, he cited the natural conditions as reason enough for avoiding elegant treatment. Olmsted devoted the largest portion of the space to what he called the Country Park. Little more than the clearing of rocks and planting of scattered trees would be needed to achieve the simple landscape that he envisioned. The original plan of 1885 contained no water features, but Olmsted created Scarboro Pond, and designed other streams and pools that appear in a later plan.

The most unusual aspect of the rustic simplicity that Olmsted planned for Franklin Park was its structures—small shelters that looked like English rural cottages and fieldstone lodges with tile roofs. But Franklin Park today is simpler than Olmsted intended, as most of his structures were destroyed by vandalism. An effort to rescue his Boston park system from decades of neglect began 15 years ago, and has only recently begun to make an appreciable difference.

Chicago World's Fair

In 1890 Chicago decided to make a name for itself, by holding a World's Fair in 1893. It was to be called the Columbian Exposition, and celebrated the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World. The exposition showcased a city only 60 years old, a city

that was reborn just 22 years after the Great Chicago Fire. It also placed before the world the genius of architects Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and Chicago architects Daniel Burnham and Louis Sullivan.

The board supervising the fair invited Olmsted, still America's premier landscape architect, to develop a site and plan for the fair. He chose Jackson Park, which at the time was a treeless marsh with a large lagoon on the edge of Lake Michigan. The site design evolved from Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's original concept of lagoons for Jackson Park. Before recommending the site to the Exposition directors in 1890, Olmsted consulted local architects who confirmed that the park's sandbars, built up with material dredged from the lagoons, could support the huge exposition buildings. The entrance to the site would be a great water plaza surrounded by buildings except at the east end, where the expanse of Lake Michigan could be seen. A canal would lead north from this Court of Honor to another series of buildings around a lagoon, in the middle of which a wooded island of about 15 acres already existed. The edges of the lagoon would be planted with aquatic plants. Each large building would have both a water and land entrance.

Olmsted's landscape was a masterpiece of design using native Midwestern plant materials. In less than three growing seasons he covered several miles of newly made raw, sandy shores with a clean, graceful, intricate green drapery. When he found that commercial nurseries would be unable to supply enough plant material, he deployed collecting parties to Illinois and Wisconsin lakes, rivers and swamps. They gathered 75 rail carloads of wild herbaceous and aquatic plants like cattails, rushes, irises and pond lilies and over 100,000 bushy

willows, which they planted along the shores. By using native Midwestern plants, Olmsted illustrated their potential in designed landscapes to all who visited the fair.

But Olmsted was not concerned with plantings alone. He believed the boats on the waterways were essential to the scenic effect of the fair, and considered them part of his province as landscape architect. He proposed a service of boats to run regularly like buses on streets, stopping at 16 landings throughout the fair. From the beginning he insisted that their appearance be light and festive. Olmsted specified that the boats be less than 30 feet long, should ride low in the water, be powered by silent electric motors and that nothing should be seen above the gunwale. He made it clear that he should not be expected to provide more detailed specifications, as that was the job of the boat designer. In his own words, "we do not advise you, be it borne in mind, as boatbuilders or as inventors, but as landscape designers." Olmsted's job was simply to state the problem.

Every detail of the fair should enhance its festive and international character, thought Olmsted. While he objected to heavy steamers because they would suggest a "solid, soulless, money-making corporate purpose," Olmsted proposed other boats that would add an international flavor: Venetian gondolas, replicas of the ships in which Columbus made his voyage, even a fleet of birchbark canoes to be paddled by Indians in deerskin moccasins. All kinds of small foreign craft could join the promenade, like Malay proas, catamarans, Chinese sampans, Japanese pilot boats, Turkish caiques and Alaskan war canoes. When the fair opened in 1893, all the boats plied its waterways.

Shortly after the opening, Olmsted told one of the project architects that the crowds seemed dull and businesslike, as if they were plodding through the duty of sightseeing. He

thought more “vital human gaiety” was needed and proposed the staging of activities that would seem to be part of the crowd: small parties of children or Russians singing, people in full native costume mingling among the visitors, a trumpeter playing on the Wooded Island, or Italian dancers with tambourines appearing unexpectedly. Olmsted’s suggestions were characteristic: he wanted not only to enliven the mood of visitors but also to create a vivid experience of community for them on an international scale.

The Exposition was larger than life, covering over 600 acres and featuring nearly 200 new buildings of European Classical architecture principles. Over 27 million people attended the Exposition—equivalent to half the U.S. population at the time—during its six-month run. But the 200 buildings were reduced to ashes in a fire in 1894, or were dismantled. Today the only remaining building houses the Museum of Science and Industry, formerly the Palace of Fine Arts. The rest of the fairground was returned to public parkland and the ponds and lagoons reconfigured. The Wooded Island is the only feature that remains as it started.

The Columbian Exposition was Olmsted’s crowning work in the Midwest. Water was the dominant feature of the landscape, as it had been in the Riverside project and other parks in Chicago, Detroit and Boston. Even though his plan for the Exposition featured the abundant water resources of the region and displayed the beauty of native Midwestern plants, Olmsted’s vision was not so much regional as national or international. His goal was to foster in America a civilization in which people of all types and nationalities might meet on common ground. Although the fair may have seemed artificial or even superficial at a time when millions of Americans were crowded together in urban poverty, it did provide a vision of how life in the

cities might be different. Olmsted's careful planning of the fair showed the American public how it might come together, as a people, in a new shared landscape.

Biltmore Estate

In 1888 Olmsted was commissioned for a project that would take him through to retirement. It was the Biltmore Estate, which George Washington Vanderbilt II had recently purchased in the mountainous countryside of Asheville, North Carolina. Biltmore became the first and grandest of America's great country estates, a vast French chateau-style house looking over formal gardens to thousands of acres of landscaped woodlands.

Vanderbilt had acquired 2,000 acres before commissioning Olmsted for the project. Vanderbilt asked him to lay out a park in the traditional manner of English estates. Olmsted insisted that the terrain was unsuitable for anything that could be called park scenery. He suggested that Vanderbilt plan a small park as a foreground for the distant view, build some gardens close to the house, and devote the rest of the acres to forestry. Vanderbilt took his advice and in time acquired 120,000 acres for his venture in scientific forestry. 80,000 of these acres became the basis of Pisgah National Forest, one of the first national forests in the eastern United States.

Olmsted designed the formal gardens, including an Italian garden, an enormous walled garden, and the sweeping vista reminiscent of Vaux-le-Vicomte that ran from the east front of the house to a statue of Diana on raised ground in the distance. He planted an arboretum,

laying out the approach to the house to run through acres of woodland until the chateau was suddenly revealed.

Today the landscape of Biltmore Estate provides a remarkable evocation of the scenic variety that Olmsted sought to create. The rhododendrons of the approach road are still striking. In the grounds near the house you can experience the progression through separate spaces planted for different effects that Olmsted designed so carefully. For Olmsted, Biltmore was a vitally important commission. In the spring of 1894 he was quoted saying, “the public is more and more making a resort of the place and I more and more feel it is the most permanently important public work and the most critical with reference to the future of our profession of all that we have.”

But working on this massive project took its toll on Olmsted’s health. Whenever he visited the estate he suffered from serious vertigo and related symptoms. By the fall of 1894 his memory was no longer reliable. And by late 1895, he withdrew from professional practice. In that same year, as he felt his powers failing, Olmsted struggled to prepare his successors to carry on. Both Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and his half brother, John C. Olmsted, kept the firm going along with other assorted partners. During the years after World War II the firm’s design legacy suffered, largely because neglect and intrusion of incompatible uses beset many of the parks and public spaces designed by the firm.

But in the last 35 years there has been a revival of interest in Olmsted’s ideas and landscapes. In 1980 the National Park Service acquired Olmsted’s home and office in Brookline, Massachusetts, along with the archive documents, plans and photographs there. The place was designated as the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. Many of the plans were

transferred to the Library of Congress and microfilmed, and are used by researchers involved in restoring landscapes designed by Olmsted and his successors.

During his career, Olmsted and his firm carried out some 500 commissions. They included 100 public parks, 200 private estates, 50 residential communities and subdivisions, and campus designs for 40 academic institutions. Olmsted was a prolific author; 6,000 letters and reports that he wrote during his career have survived.

As various cities have begun restoration of Olmsted projects, it's time to assess his work and plan for its second century of use. There is a passage written by John Ruskin in his last park report for Boston's Franklin Park: "Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for and let us think...that a time is to come when...men will say, 'See! This our fathers did for us.' "