

THE IDEA BEHIND THE DESIGN

To fully appreciate a landscape designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, it is important to understand his keen interest in improving the well being of society. Olmsted was living at a time of unprecedented growth and change. America was experiencing what might be termed an urban explosion. Olmsted seemed to be intuitively aware of the changes society was undergoing and of the needs of not only his generation, but of the generations to come. Parks, he thought, were a necessity. They provided a place to relax, unwind, escape and imagine. In 1881, Olmsted explained the strength of the American park movement:

"Considering it has occurred simultaneously with a great enlargement of towns and development of urban habits, is it not reasonable to regard it as a self-preserving instinct of civilization?"

It was Olmsted's belief that the experience of the carefully composed landscape elicited a psychological response; that the occasional escape to these green havens helped to reduce the strain and tension caused by city life. The purpose behind each of Olmsted's creations was to promote, through the powers of nature, the physical and psychological well being of those who passed through them.

The writings of Johann Zimmerman and Horace Bushnell influenced the young Olmsted. Zimmerman, a Swiss physician, had explored nature's ability to heal derangements of the mind. Bushnell, a clergyman, had written extensively on the powers of landscape: "Scenery works by an unconscious process to produce ... {an} unbending of faculties made tense by the strain, noise and artificial surroundings of urban life." Olmsted was sensitive to this power and wrote of his personal experience:

"Landscapes move us in a manner more nearly analogous to the action of music than to anything else... Gradually and silently the charm overcomes us; we know not exactly where or how."

In addition to providing a specific medical antidote to urban ills, Olmsted felt that public parks promoted a sense of community. Indeed, Olmsted considered himself a "civilizer" of cities. His public parks provided a common setting where people from all income levels and walks of life could communicate with others, as well as with nature. In a soothing, natural environment, people would mix and rub elbows with those they might not otherwise have a chance to meet. The shared experience would do away with inhibitions; intimacy would dissolve prejudice and fear. It was the basic premise of what Olmsted eloquently referred to as "democracy in the dirt."