

ASSESSING THE WORK OF THE OLMSTED FIRM

In 1979, the National Park Service acquired Olmsted's home and office in Brookline, Massachusetts, along with many thousands of plans, photographs and related archives produced by the firm. The Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site opened to visitors and researchers in 1981. The Library of Congress has also consolidated its holdings of Olmsted's papers and the professional records of the firm. Since 1973, federal and private sources have funded a project to publish a 12-volume series of Olmsted's writings. The National Association for Olmsted Parks, formed in 1980, has been active in publicizing the work of the firm and encouraging the formation of state and local preservation groups. At the same time, a variety of programs and projects aimed at restoring Olmsted landscapes throughout the nation have been initiated - most notably in the City of New York and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Although the true extent of Olmsted's role in shaping the American landscape has not been fully explored, the general figures are impressive. Between 1857 and 1950, the firm participated in some way in 5,000 projects in 45 of the United States and in Canada. Basic records indicate that the firm drew up plans for 3,500 of these including 650 public parks and recreation areas, 900 private estates, 270 subdivisions and residential communities, 245 school and college campuses, and the grounds of 60 hospitals and asylums, 65 libraries and other public institutions, 75 commercial and industrial buildings, and 40 churches. In Massachusetts, the state with the largest number of Olmsted landscapes, the firm was involved in some 1,200 projects in more than 150 communities.

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) had a wide-ranging and ambitious concept of the role landscape architecture might play in helping shape American civilization. His extensive travels in the American South and West, Western Europe, the British Isles and China gave him a remarkable breadth of experience. Work as a writer and publisher led him to define his views on a whole series of questions about art, politics, economics, and social organization. By the close of the Civil War, Olmsted had determined for himself what he wished American society to be and had chosen the means by which he could promote those ideals over the next few decades.

Olmsted had great faith in the ability of landscape architecture to have a positive effect on society and, in particular, promote a sense of community. His great parks were to be available to all regardless of class and free from the competitiveness and antagonisms of workaday life. Furthermore, his plans for residential suburbs provided for common space that would foster both physical health and what Olmsted called "communitiveness."

Olmsted believed that scenery could have a powerful psychological effect on people. He was convinced that the spacious terrain of his parks would provide an antidote to the artificiality, noise and strain of city life. In this and many other ways, Olmsted strove to use his skill as an artist to meet the most fundamental of human needs in a comprehensive and effective way. The psychological power of scenery, he believed, could be achieved in landscape design only by subordination of all elements to the creation of a single whole. Olmsted defied specimen planting or the introduction of works of architecture and sculpture intended solely for their individual beauty. In the same spirit, Olmsted excluded ornamental and decorative features from the buildings he designed, preferring a simple, organic plan that concentrated on fulfilling a particular function:

*"So long as considerations of utility are neglected
or overridden by considerations of ornament,
there can be no true Art."*

For reasons of function as well as effect, Olmsted carefully separated different activities and styles of planting. He abhorred an "incongruous mixture of styles," believing that each designed space should have a single, coherent quality. Likewise, he separated potentially conflicting uses in his parks and created spaces carefully designed for each activity. Different kinds of traffic were also separated in parks and along parkways for reasons of safety and enjoyment.

How closely Frederick Law Olmsted's successors adhered to his principles in the face of changing technology, social conditions and recreational needs has yet to be determined. In the process of researching the content and extent of the Olmsted firm's work, much will be learned about its significance in the designed landscape of America and much practical knowledge will be secured for the process of restoring the Olmsted landscape.

*Borrowed in part from Charles E. Beveridge, Editor
The Olmsted Papers Project*