

Revisiting Riverside: A Frederick Law Olmsted Community

Abstract

Riverside, IL is a suburban village designed between 1868 and 1869 by the landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. The design of Riverside is significant because the character of the community created by the designers was unlike that of other suburbs of the time. Today, Riverside remains a vibrant community. The significance of the landscape architecture of Riverside has been recognized at the national, state, and local levels. In 1970, Riverside was designated a National Historic Landmark, in recognition of its historic landscape architecture.

The intent of this master's project is to increase the understanding of the principles Olmsted used in the design of Riverside, and the understanding of the relevance of these design principles in the modern Riverside landscape. Although much has been written about Riverside, our research did not reveal any drawings or illustrations that effectively aid in the understanding and visualization of Olmsted's design process and his intended design. Therefore, a key focus of this master's project is to effectively organize and communicate the principles of Olmsted's design for Riverside, using both written and visual methods. We also investigate the residents' perception of the Riverside landscape and how this relates to Olmsted's original design principles. We created and administered a survey in order to learn more about how residents of Riverside perceive their historic landscape. In general, the spaces and views most preferred by residents strongly exhibited the design principles. Spaces and views that were least preferred by residents were incongruous with the overall design and feeling of Riverside. A final goal of this project is to understand whether or not the design of Riverside has influenced subsequent suburban community design. We explored trends in suburban development from the 1850s through today. We found that model suburban communities have built upon the successes and shortcomings of the development models that preceded them. Riverside's provisions for open space, preservation of natural site features, and separation of vehicle and pedestrian routes has served as an inspiration for many of these models.