

Chapter 3

England and Birkenhead Park: Influencing the Design of Riverside

Olmsted Travels to England

Throughout his life, Fredrick Law Olmsted was influenced by the books he read, the people he met, and the landscapes he experienced. However, “his first enthusiasm, spontaneous and lasting, was for the enchanting English countryside” (Roper 68). The characteristics of the English landscape, along with the social function and aesthetic quality of English park design, became the primary driving influence behind Olmsted’s parks and planned communities.

Olmsted was introduced to the English landscape in his mid teens when he discovered a portfolio of prints of English park scenery, which “he poured, fascinated, over” (Roper 11). Olmsted’s fascination with these prints led him to seek out Sir Uvedale Price’s *The Picturesque* and William Gilpin’s *Remarks on Forest Scenery and other Woodland Views*, eighteenth-century English writings on the picturesque (Roper 11). These first experiences sparked in Olmsted an undying interest in the English landscape, which profoundly influenced his life and career.

Commonplace Scenery

At the age of 28, Olmsted, along with his brother, John, and friend, Charles Brace, had the opportunity to travel abroad to England. During this visit, Olmsted discovered a “love of England that was a rooted, almost an instinctive, sentiment with him”(Roper 68). “At first sight of England a sense of familiarity, of having returned to his ancestral home, rushed over him, bathing him with comfort and happiness” (Roper 68). During this visit, Olmsted developed a deep interest in what he termed “the commonplace scenery” of midland rural England that he did not quite understand—since it had no particular or striking features. However, in later years, Olmsted was still able to say:

though I had visited many places celebrated for grandeur and had lived for months in Texas in perhaps the finest natural pastoral scenery in the world, I had nowhere else been so charmed as I was continually while walking through those

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parts of England least distinguished and commonly least remarked upon by travelers as beautiful. (Olmsted, Walks 229)
The views Olmsted saw were familiar. However, the feelings that they gave him “persisted throughout his trip—and in modified form all his life” (Roper 68).

Although he had not realized it at the time, the experiences Olmsted had during his visit to England resulted in his two absorbing interests—one in the landscape, the other in elevating the character and condition of the poorer classes (Roper 71). These interests fostered within Olmsted a passion for developing public parks in cities. Visiting the English city of Birkenhead and its associated park became one of the most influential experiences during Olmsted’s journey through England.

A People’s Park

Birkenhead Park was integrated into a new city, designed by Sir Joseph Paxton, under the direction of architect, Gillespie Graham in 1844 (Stevenson 54). The park was roughly laid out in its present form by June of the following year (Olmsted, Walks 53). Birkenhead Park played a large role in initiating the movement for public parks in England and abroad (Chadwick 49). For this reason, it became Paxton’s most important and most influential landscape design.

Birkenhead served as a model for the planning of a combined suburb and public park. Its development began in 1842, when the Third Improvement Act was passed. This Act allowed the Birkenhead Commissioners to provide a park that was “freely accessible to the public out of public funds” (Chadwick 50). It stipulated that not less than seventy acres were to be set aside for the free recreation of the inhabitants. In the end, a total of 226 acres were purchased for the development of Birkenhead, 125 acres of which were “appropriated for public use in perpetuity” (Chadwick 50). The remaining acreage was sold for building sites.

Because the Third Improvement Act appropriated land for public use, Birkenhead became a park that was used freely by citizens of every class to “pass leisure hours in restful surroundings” (Roper 71). Olmsted observed invalids, nurses and mothers with children, and

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whole families on holidays enjoying their own park paid for out of their own tax money (Roper 71). Olmsted was “glad to observe that the privileges of the garden were enjoyed about equally by all classes” (Olmsted, Walks 53). He remarks:

And all this magnificent pleasure ground is entirely, unreservedly, and for ever, the people’s own. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British queen. More than that the baker of Birkenhead [as with the public as a whole] has the pride of an OWNER in it. (Olmsted, Walks 54)

He stated, “five minutes of admiration, and a few more spent studying the manner in which art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty, and I was ready to admit that in democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People’s Garden” (Olmsted, Walks 52). This comment captures Olmsted’s respect for Birkenhead Park. He saw how its design captured the beauty of the area “by adapting lawn and trees and slopes from nature and by accommodating the needs of human beings” (Stevenson 55).

Designed Nature

Indeed, Olmsted was taken by Birkenhead Park and how Paxton transformed the 125 acres of flat, clay farmland into a successful public park. The constructed naturalness of the park, which was highly influenced by the qualities of the English landscape, intrigued Olmsted. There were no formal vistas or straight lines on the site. The park’s picturesque ponds, random clumps of trees, rolling meadows, overgrown hillocks, and meandering footpaths reminded Olmsted of the simple English countryside. However, what fascinated Olmsted the most was the fact that the romantic pastoral scenery was wholly man-made (Rybczynski 93):

He [Paxton] had dug a lake and, with the earth taken from it, varied the level surface with artful naturalness; he had created shady glens, open meadows dotted with trees, rock gardens, cricket and archery grounds, ornamental buildings, avenues of trees; and he had made the whole accessible by good hard roads and footpaths. (Roper 71)

It was also at Birkenhead that Olmsted observed gardening that had “reached perfection”:

I cannot undertake to describe the effect of so much taste and skill as had evidently been employed; I will only tell you, that we passed by winding paths, over acres and acres, with a constant varying surface, where on all sides were

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growing every variety of shrubs and flowers, with more than natural grace, all set in borders of greenest, closest turf, and all kept with consummate neatness. (Olmsted, Walks 52)

Olmsted believed that Birkenhead was “a model town” which was “built at all in accordance with the advanced science, taste, and enterprising spirit that are supposed to distinguish the nineteenth century” (Olmsted, Walks 55).

Attention to Transportation Routes

The separation of transportation routes at Birkenhead Park, along with their high-quality of construction, became one of the park’s most influential design characteristics:

The park site is bounded by roads for the ordinary traffic of the town and for convenience, because of the length of the park, a transverse road across the park was necessary. Inside the villa belt is the carriage drive for pleasure traffic only (service to the villas is exclusively from the exterior roads). Within the park are the footpaths, linking all parts and with convenient connections to the outside traffic roads (Chadwick 53).

Birkenhead Park was not the first public park to exhibit this type of a circulation system, but it displayed a relatively thorough separation of traffic. This separation was the first of its kind and became a major influence to Olmsted, especially in relation to his future designs of public parks and planned communities (Chadwick 53). The quality of the road construction was also observed by and commented on by Olmsted:

The roads are macadamized [*made by rolling successive layers of small broken stones, sometimes combined with a binder—such as tar or asphalt—on a dry earth roadbed*]. On each side of the carriage way, and of all the walks, pipes for drainage are laid, which communicate with deep main drains that run under the edge of all the mounds or flower beds. The walks are laid first with six inches of fine broken stone, then three inches of cinders, and the surface with six inches of fine rolled gravel. All the stones on the ground which were not used for these purposes were laid in masses of rock-work, and mosses and rock-plants were attached to them. The mounds were finally planted with shrubs and heaths and ferns, and the beds with flowering plants. Between these and the walks and drives, is everywhere a belt of turf (which, by the way, is kept close cut with short, broad scythes, and shears, and swept with *hair-brooms* as we say). (Olmsted, Walks 54)

These transportation routes were well drained, carefully constructed, lighted, safe, and convenient. These qualities allowed for ease of use, and consequently, ease of movement in and

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around Birkenhead Park. In addition, because Birkenhead Park was open to the public, people of all classes had the opportunity to make use of the well designed transportation systems to gain access the public land.

It was also in England, near Hereford, the Olmsted first observed sunken roads, “narrow, deep and shady, often not wider than the cart-track, and so deep that the grassy banks on each side where higher than our heads” (Olmsted, Walks 226). These sunken roads appealed greatly to Olmsted, and became very influential to his future suburban and park designs.

Landscape for the People, Landscape for Profit

Olmsted was inspired by landscape designs that focused on public open spaces, which were safe, convenient, and aesthetically beautiful. It was at Birkenhead that he first saw the possibilities of providing public space that was paid for and owned by its users. Olmsted’s visit to Birkenhead Park served to develop in him the conviction that “such public grounds were a necessity to civilized urban living” (Roper 71).

It was also at Birkenhead that Olmsted realized how the public land, when designed in conjunction with private building lots, could pay for itself. These lots, adjacent to Birkenhead Park, had also been graded, landscaped, and connected to high quality roads. The value of the land at Birkenhead proved to be seven times its first cost, and local land values had soared accordingly (Chadwick 51). Yet, the integration of public land with private lots had not been implemented in the American landscape. It was Olmsted who pioneered this movement within the United States based on his experiences in England.

Continuing the Landscape Tradition

Olmsted’s involvement in the landscape was born out of respect and understanding of those who historically shaped the principles of landscape gardening. In studying the work of his predecessors and contemporaries, Olmsted was able to build on their philosophies and mold them into the profession of landscape architecture. Olmsted went on to influence many others who

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became involved in the profession. He inspired them to take notice of the landscape and the potential impact that its design can have on society. He is known as the father of landscape architecture, and the traditions he established are recognized and utilized currently in the profession.