

Chapter 6

Riverside Today

Over the past twenty years, several individuals have taken inventory of the Riverside landscape, evaluated it with respect to Olmsted and Vaux's intended design, and provided recommendations for its rehabilitation. Each report provides valuable information, but no report is entirely comprehensive. However, piecing together the valuable contributions of each author provides:

- an introduction to the natural history of Riverside and an understanding of the geological landforms, soil types and presettlement vegetation that existed at Riverside
- a summary of the history of the English landscape gardening style of the early eighteenth century and how this style influenced nineteenth century landscape designers such as Downing and Olmsted
- an understanding of Olmsted's design philosophy and the design principles he used at Riverside
- an understanding of which parts of the 1869 General Plan of Riverside were executed and where original elements exist today
- an evaluation of the current (post 1980) condition of Riverside's landscape (including constructed features as well as vegetation)
- a listing of trees and shrubs that were presumably planted under Olmsted's direction and that are suitable to the climate and soil conditions of Riverside
- suggestions regarding how vegetation should be maintained and how new vegetation should be planted in order to replicate the design intent of Olmsted and Vaux.

The following discussion summarizes the contributions of each report as well those of this project. The table at the end of this chapter provides a quick comparison of the reports and the information provided in each.

Studies of Riverside: History

The three reports from academia, Sieron (University of Michigan, Landscape Architecture Program), Cairns and Kesler (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Dept. of Landscape Architecture), and this report (Faiks, et al., University of Michigan, Landscape Architecture Program) provide more background information than the other reports. This background information helps the reader understand the significance of Riverside with respect to

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its natural history, cultural history, and its history as a designed village. Cairns and Kesler provide the most thorough introduction to the natural history of Riverside: its geological landforms, soil types and presettlement vegetation. This information is important in order to understand the plant materials that are appropriate for use in Riverside. Sieron and Faiks, et al. provide information about the history of landscape architecture, biographical information about Olmsted, and information about other landscape designers whose work influenced Olmsted. This information is important because it provides an understanding of the design style that Olmsted intended for Riverside. Sieron includes a valuable discussion of how various visual techniques, such as the introduction of false perspective, can be achieved. Each of these reports address the cultural history and design history of Riverside, but with a slightly different perspective. Sieron includes copies of historic photographs that help illustrate the matured effects of Olmsted's planting at Riverside (54). Cairns and Kesler focus on the history of the Riverside Improvement Company and the development stages of Riverside. The maps included in their report provide an interesting comparison of Riverside's development in 1895, 1909, 1933, and 1967. Faiks, et al. discuss the urban conditions of Chicago in the late nineteenth century and how these conditions influenced the need for a "rural suburban village" like Riverside.

Kunka (architect and Riverside resident) provides some additional insight regarding Riverside's design history. He explains that there is no known planting plan for Riverside's public areas by Olmsted & Vaux, and that Olmsted and Vaux had resigned from Riverside before planting had presumably begun. (The Chicago Fire in October 1871 destroyed the records of the Riverside Improvement Company and the plans that Olmsted and Vaux had drawn (Beveridge and Rocheleau 124)). Whether planting plans were among those documents is unknown.) It is likely, he concludes, that the architectural firm of Jenney, Schemerhorn, and Bogart, who supervised the construction of the new suburb, were responsible for the planting as well (Kunka 2). Kunka does not provide any additional information regarding this observation; for example, were Olmsted and Jenney communicating about plant species and placement? However, Kunka

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does state that Jenney was technically and philosophically capable of executing Olmsted's plan (2), so one may infer that Kunka believes the planting was executed as Olmsted and Vaux had intended.

Studies of Riverside: Design Principles

All of the reports, except Mehaffey (landscape architect and Riverside consultant), discuss Olmsted and Vaux's design intent at Riverside. Kunka includes an excerpt from Olmsted's writings that mentions the types of trees and shrubs to be planted at Riverside. Sieron also references Olmsted's writings regarding vegetation type and its arrangement at Riverside, but provides more information than Kunka. Sieron, Straka (architect and Riverside resident), Cairns and Kesler, and Faiks, et al. discuss the *features* of Olmsted and Vaux's design for Riverside. These design features are referred to interchangeably as design intent, landscape characteristics, planning and design devices, and design principles. Sieron and Faiks, et al. provide the most in-depth discussion of Riverside's design principles: what are the design principles, how do we know this, and how were the design principles used? Cairns and Kesler simply provide a summary, in list form, of the design as described in the Riverside General Plan. They do not illustrate or interpret how these design devices were used. Straka outlines the design as described in the Riverside General Plan, but also lists the "characteristics of the Riverside landscape," a general outline of how plant materials can be chosen and used to achieve visual effects, part of the overall design principles, intended by Olmsted and Vaux.

Therefore, of the six reports, Sieron, Faiks, et al., and Straka provide the most information about Olmsted and Vaux's design principles. Sieron and Faiks, et al. provide background information that substantiates why we believe these are the design principles and how Olmsted and Vaux would have applied them in Riverside. In Sieron's report, the design principles must be culled out of the text by the reader. Faiks et al. provide a unique and organized presentation of the design principles. Sieron's detailed discussion focuses on

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Olmsted's design as it relates to vegetation. He addresses both the type of vegetation planted as well as the visual effects created by the careful placement of vegetation. It is a very valuable discussion, although he does not address the built features of Riverside's design in as much detail. Faiks, et al. discuss the design principles as they relate to both vegetation and built features. However, our (Faiks, et al.) discussion of vegetation focuses more on form, texture, placement and visual effects, providing less information on specific species of vegetation than Sieron. Straka provides a similar discussion to Sieron's, but much more concise. Straka's discussion is valuable for its brevity and its listing of *what* to do with vegetation. Sieron's discussion is valuable because it attempts to help the reader understand *why* such attention to vegetation types and placement creates certain visual effects. What sets our report apart from previous discussions of design principles is that we intend to bring these written descriptions of the design principles to life in visual form. Through illustrations and models we intend to reach out to those not trained in art or landscape design, those that may not be able to visualize the design principles simply by reading about them.

Studies of Riverside: Inventory

Armed with the knowledge of Olmsted and Vaux's design principles for Riverside, it is possible to conduct an inventory of the landscape. The inventory can help assess the sustainability of the original design: how the design has withstood the test of time and the demands imposed by modern society. Two reports conduct an inventory within Riverside and relate this to Olmsted and Vaux's design: Sieron and Cairns and Kesler. (Mehaffey lists "general observations" regarding existing vegetation, gaslights, color of benches and recreational equipment, etc. However, this is not a specific inventory and does not relate to Olmsted and Vaux's design.)

Sieron focuses his inventory on the Long Common; an inventory and analysis of the vegetation existing within the Long Common in 1981 is provided in detail. He uses this

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inventory to develop a “Methodology for Reconstruction at Riverside,” a schematic plan for the replanting and placement of vegetation masses within the Long Common. The plan is influenced by thorough research; it attempts to recreate Olmsted’s intended scenic effects, as outlined by Sieron earlier in his report. He provides detailed reasoning for the proposed design. Sieron’s landscape plan for the Long Common is thorough and could be implemented with the information provided.

Cairns and Kesler provide a detailed inventory of Riverside’s existing (1986) landscape, including constructed features as well as vegetation. Nine public areas are inventoried and problems are identified. Their evaluation of access/entry, land use patterns, and the relationship of roads to open space to private space are more relevant today than the landscape evaluation, as specific vegetation has likely changed since publication due to natural causes and village forestry efforts. They use the inventory to develop an “overall framework” for landscape conservation. The recommendations are general guidelines and, as a result, are intended to require further development by planning, ecology and design professions.

Studies of Riverside: Plant and Planting Recommendations

Each of the six reports on Riverside provides some type of plant recommendations (plant types) and/or planting recommendations (how to plant). Sieron, Straka, Kunka, and Mehaffey recommend the use of native plants within Riverside. As mentioned earlier and as pointed out in some of the reports, Olmsted, too, advocated the use of native plants. Unlike the prairie landscape architects, however, he did not use only native plants; he would use non-native plants if he felt they were appropriate to achieve a desired visual effect. Sieron includes a section on trees native to the Riverside area, as well as excerpts from Olmsted’s writings that describe the types of trees that he intended to be planted at Riverside. Sieron provides the most comprehensive discussion regarding appropriate species for planting at Riverside.

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Kunka and Mehaffey's reports have a strong maintenance focus. Mehaffey outlines specific maintenance and planting actions. While the recommendations are based on important ecological principles, they do not address how plants could be placed or maintained to help preserve, maintain or recreate the pastoral landscape that is essential to Olmsted and Vaux's design (creation of views and spaces; contrast of textures and light/shade; creation of false perspective; etc.). It is important that planting and maintenance plans for Riverside consider both ecology and the original design intent together.

Sieron, Straka, Cairns and Kesler, and Faiks, et al. provide information regarding how plants could be placed in order to achieve the pastoral quality and visual affects intended by Olmsted and Vaux. Sieron's report includes planting plans for the Long Common that show modifications to the existing (1981) plantings in order to recreate Olmsted and Vaux's intended scenic effects. Sieron provides sound, detailed reasoning for the proposed design. Straka briefly describes how plant types, size, spacing, heights and layering, color and placement contribute to the intended visual effect of Riverside. Cairns and Kesler also list the ways plants could be used to achieve the qualities Olmsted would have intended. However, they rely heavily on terminology perhaps familiar to design professionals, but not to village residents and officials. As a result, the discussion is elusive to the general public and it is not clear how various landscape qualities could actually be created. The few illustrations do not provide useful examples of the planting techniques described. Faiks, et al. use drawings, and models to illustrate the design principles. Unlike Sieron's work, the illustrations are not plans specific to a particular area within Riverside. Instead, they illustrate design principles that can be experienced throughout the village. And unlike Cairns and Kesler, the intended audience includes not only design professionals, but also village residents and officials.

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Lessons from the Studies: How the Original Design is Exhibited in Riverside Today

The inventories conducted by Sieron, Cairns and Kesler, combined with our observations and discussions with residents and village employees, provide an idea of which of Olmsted's design principles remain in Riverside today, which areas within Riverside exhibit Olmsted and Vaux's original design intent, and which areas may compromise the original design intent. In general, the pattern of the Village of Riverside is essentially as it was intended: a naturalistic development, consisting of residential homes, a small commercial and institutional center, a rail depot, a system of large and small parks and commons, and its location along the Des Plaines River (Cairns and Kesler 36). The fact that the general pattern of Riverside remains strongly intact is, in large part, thanks to Olmsted and Vaux's foresight in planning which created a strong, lasting framework for the village. In Riverside, several important innovations were instituted, including: building setbacks, tree-planting requirements, a network of community parklands, minimum house prices, and a ban on fences. All of these were written into deeds (Grese 38). Credit must also be given to the village residents and leadership for the preservation of public land, attention to design details such as the gaslights that still grace Riverside, and for the continuation of deed restrictions.

With a few exceptions, the physical design of Riverside is greatly intact. These exceptions include the subdivision of areas never owned by the Riverside Improvement Company, the subdivision of many 100' x 200' lots into two lots, the replacement of the cobblestone gutters with concrete curbs and gutters, and the raising of the road level due to paving. Cairns and Kesler note, "A chronological study of the development pattern of Riverside from 1870-1970 reveals that the originally intended combination of 100' lots, curving cobbled guttered streets and major parks and common areas was the pattern of development only for a short era from 1870-1890" (56). The areas that were never owned by the Riverside Improvement Company, including the Maplewood Addition and the former location of the Babson Estate, were laid out differently than Olmsted and Vaux had shown on the General Plan. These areas can be

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readily picked out on a map or aerial photo because their street layout is either gridded or is less graceful than the roads laid out by Olmsted and Vaux. The Maplewood Addition and the area south of this were established along the Des Plaines River in an area that was to be reserved as public space. Some homes in these areas experience flooding problems. Beginning in the 1890s many of the larger lots were subdivided into two lots with widths of 50' to 75'. Smaller houses were constructed on these lots, a pattern of development that continued through the 1920s and 1930s when a substantial number of homes were constructed in Riverside (Cairns and Kesler 24).

Riverside's road layout is the village's most obvious form giver and the most enduring design principle. With the exceptions noted above, the road layout and width follow Olmsted and Vaux's General Plan. The surfacing of the road has changed to meet accepted standards. Of course, Riverside's roads are still "frost-proof" and "rain-proof" as Olmsted and Vaux had intended. However, asphalt pavement and concrete curbs and gutters have replaced the original crushed gravel road surface and cobbled gutters. Many areas retained their cobbled gutters as recently as 1997. Due to the application of asphalt pavement, the roads are not as sunken into the landscape as they were originally intended to be. However, they are still recessed into the landscape more than the roads in most developments. In some areas (especially the east-west roads through the Long Common) the roads are still sunken by several feet. Olmsted and Vaux intended the road layout to create a procession through the village, which can still be experienced today. In "Another and different look at the General Plan of Riverside, 1869," Straka describes the procession of views and landscape spatial experiences that one encounters while traversing along the Long Common, through the Village Center, and along Scottswood Common to the Des Plaines River.

Like the road layout, Riverside's public spaces are also a very important design feature and distinguish Riverside from other communities. Olmsted and Vaux advocated the reservation of public space for recreation and to safeguard the best scenery. In the General Plan, they set aside large areas including the entire floodplain and banks of the Des Plaines River that lie within

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the village, as well as upland areas like Scottswood Common and the Long Common. Because the Riverside Improvement Company did not acquire all the land shown in the General Plan, not all of Olmsted and Vaux's public land was realized. However, all of the public open space that existed at the time Riverside was developed remains as public open space today with one exception: the area on which the Riverside Swim Club was constructed. Many communities are not as fortunate. For example, Sudbrook, Maryland, a subdivision planned by Olmsted in 1889, retains its proposed street configuration and lot size. However, the area he reserved as a village green was instead divided into residential lots (Beveridge and Rocheleau 124).

Vegetation within public spaces and residential setbacks is another critical design principle. Because vegetation matures, dies and self-sows, vegetation is more ephemeral than the roads and the delineation of public spaces (many of which are defined by the road pattern). It is not realistic to try and recreate the exact planting plan that may have originally graced Riverside. Olmsted himself acknowledged that vegetation he planted would grow, require thinning, and change character over time. What is important is to understand the style in which Olmsted planted and the effects he was trying to create. This is why it is important to understand the original design principles, as well as the vegetation types he would have planted, and the vegetation appropriate to Riverside's climate. Residents and village leaders have recognized this and have worked hard since the early 1980s to understand what and how to plant, and to restore the vegetation within the public areas so that it better reflects Olmsted and Vaux's intended planting style. These efforts have led to the writing of many of the reports referenced above. Of course there are differences in opinion among residents and experts about exactly what should be done, but recent village efforts with respect to planting, vegetative restoration, and urban forestry must be commended. Hopefully, our efforts to illustrate and help residents and village leaders visualize the design principles will contribute to increased understanding and consensus building regarding landscape planning and planting.

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Access to Riverside from Chicago was also an important part of Olmsted and Vaux's original design. The railroad connecting Riverside with downtown Chicago, which existed at the time of Riverside's design, is still viable and used heavily by commuters. Olmsted and Vaux had proposed the formation of an approach road from Chicago to Riverside. They intended it to provide a pleasurable travel experience and to provide a promenade for the Chicago area. (Promenading was a popular pastime in Europe and the eastern US at that time.) There are conflicting reports regarding whether or not this road was ever built. Most writings about Riverside simply mention that this road was never built. However, two sources refer to its partial construction. An 1871 publication by the Riverside Improvement Company states:

To complete the enterprise, a fine drive or parkway is under construction, to connect Riverside with Chicago. This parkway is 150 feet wide, and is divided into a central roadway forty feet wide, which is the drive, and is to be used only for pleasure carriages; second, a bridle path, ten feet wide, enclosed between two borders of turf eight feet wide, and avenues of trees; then on the other side is a walk, and outside of these are roads on each side, twenty five feet wide, for heavy traffic... It will be eight miles long, and its construction is undertaken by the town of Cicero, through which it passes and the city of Chicago. It is now so nearly finished, and the work is being pushed with so much energy, that the Company expect it to be open its entire length by the middle of July next, some seven miles already being completed (20).

A second source states, "several miles of the parkway were constructed over the next few years" (Beveridge and Rocheleau 118). Cairns and Kesler speculate in their report about where traces of the proposed route may still be evidenced. This is certainly an area of Riverside's history and original design that needs more investigation.

Swan Pond is another aspect of Riverside needing more documentation. In its current state it contains stairways, paths and levees, many from the Works Progress Administration- (WPA) era of the 1930s. Cairns and Kesler performed an inventory of this area in their report, but never once mentioned the WPA. It would be interesting to understand if any of the existing paths follow their original layout, which landscape features may be historical contributions of the WPA, and which may have no historical significance. Historical photographs and writings could be used to piece together this area as it looked in the late 1800s. Does it correspond to Olmsted

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and Vaux's General Plan that shows a Picnic Island? Attention to this area is justified as many residents indicate that Swan Pond is their favorite public, outdoor space within the Riverside landscape. (See Chapter 8, *Residents' Perception of Riverside*.) Additionally, there is discussion about proposed work involving the Army Corps of Engineers in this area, including the removal of Hoffman Dam. Increased understanding of the design and development stages of this area could be a valuable and interesting educational tool for residents and village leaders.

What is important to remember about the design principles or individual elements of the design is that they are part of the whole. The original design begins to lose its integrity as individual elements, such as the sunken roads, cobblestone gutters and naturalistic plantings within public areas and setbacks, are lost. Cairns and Kesler said it well:

It should be noted that these singular elements: large houses, 100' lots, cobbled-gutter streets and adjacent park and parkway containing informal planting, are integrally related. Each supports the next and the composite effect is the perceived rural character which closely resembles that proposed by the Olmsted and Vaux design. In places where only one or two of these elements exist, the effect is less striking (56).

Straka also makes the following point: "The overall scene was of ultimate importance with all individual elements of the composition subordinated to and supporting the total setting" (2). Many residents and Riverside's leaders recognize this. However, original features of the design have been lost even recently (for example the cobblestone gutters), and reaching consensus among the residents and various interest groups is extremely challenging for the village. What is encouraging is the level of interest among residents, the village leadership and, recently, the involvement of the National Park Service (NPS). With the level of experience the NPS brings, the village may have better access to information regarding planning and funding for preservation efforts.

Contributing to the Preservation of Riverside

As this discussion demonstrates, there is much interest in studying and preserving the Riverside landscape. Most of the above authors are village residents. Many other residents are

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active in the study and preservation of Riverside through organizations such as the Riverside Historical Commission, The National Association for Olmsted Parks, The Frederick Law Olmsted Society, and Riverside's Landscape Advisory Commission. The active role that the residents play as well as the sincere interest of the village government has helped ensure that the legacy of Olmsted's design for Riverside is not lost. The following table summarizes the contributions of the above authors to the study and documentation of Riverside.