

Chapter 7

*Design Giants in Riverside:
Olmsted, Wright, and the Prairie Landscape —
Architects*

Riverside is not only graced with the design work of Olmsted and Vaux, but is home to the work of other famous architects and landscape architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright and Jens Jensen. Wright, an architect, and Jensen, a landscape architect, are renown as pioneers of the prairie style of architecture and landscape architecture, respectively. The presence of these historic homes and landscapes within the greater landscape of Riverside itself can be a source of confusion for some residents and village officials. How does the landscape architectural style of Olmsted and Vaux compare to that of Wright and the prairie landscape architects? Can they co-exist?

The Midwestern movement in landscape architecture, which became known as the prairie style of landscape design, originated with the work of Ossian Cole (O.C.) Simonds. Simonds studied civil engineering and architecture, graduating with a civil engineering degree from the University of Michigan in 1878. He was first employed by Jenney in Chicago. His engineering work at Chicago's Graceland Cemetery eventually led to his position as superintendent of the cemetery in 1881. As superintendent, he had full authority for the development of the cemetery. Simonds used thickets of native shrubs and trees with gently sculpted landforms and bodies of water in his attempt to make Graceland a quiet, restful image of the midwestern landscape (Grese 35). Simonds became so well known for his naturalistic design at Graceland cemetery that Chicago's wealthiest families demanded his services to design naturalistic grounds for their estates (Gelbloom 7). However, little documentation exists of Simonds designs.

Although Simonds began designing prairie style landscapes four years before Jensen immigrated to America from Denmark, it is Jensen who is generally considered the founder of the prairie style. This is because the self-effacing Simonds usually submerged his own unique ideas

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amid quotations from other landscape architects and attributed his design ideas to “old principles” (i.e the ideas of the English landscape gardeners, Downing, and Olmsted) (Gelbloom 18). Jensen, on the other hand, publicized the unique characteristics of the prairie style and sold them as his own innovations. “Yet all of [the] elements which predominated in Jensen’s landscapes were first elucidated in Simonds’ work” (Gelbloom 17).

The ideas of the prairie style landscape architects emerged from the English and early American landscape traditions. Downing, Olmsted and the prairie style landscape architects espoused the preservation of the natural features of landscapes, which was in opposition to the prevailing concept of landscape gardening as an art of ornamental embellishment. Prairie landscape architects adopted Olmsted’s basic principles. These principles include: relating the layout of the designed landscape to original landscape features, avoiding formal design except in very limited areas about the buildings, utilizing open lawns and meadows in large central areas, creating flowing outdoor spaces, and providing circulation by means of organically curving and wide sweeping roads and paths. Olmsted, in turn, derived these principles from English theories and precedents (Gelbloom 13). “Simonds and Jensen made no secret of their deep respect for Olmsted and considered him an exemplar for the profession” (Grese 22).

The uniqueness that prairie landscape architects added to these precedents was their use and grouping of native plants, and the repetition throughout a design of the level horizon of the prairie landscape. Prairie style landscape architects relied heavily upon the use of native plants and often grouped species together based upon “nature’s own arrangement of species within a given region” (Grese 11). Wilhelm Miller, who in the early 1900s wrote extensively about the prairie landscape style, described “the [repetitious] use of what he termed “stratified materials” – for example, rockwork made up of flat limestone layers, or plants characterized by distinctive horizontal branching or flowering clusters. Both of these elements were common in Simonds’ and Jensen’s work” (Grese 47). The prairie landscape architects interest in the use of native plants in their arrangements grew from an increased understanding that native plants tended to

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fare better in the Midwestern landscape than some exotic species, coupled with the development in the late 1800s of the concept of plant “communities” and the science of ecology. “While they realized it was possible to preserve only relatively small portions of “idealized nature” in their work, Simonds and Jensen used their designs to try to teach the general public about the natural heritage of midwestern landscapes...This attitude was fundamental to the practitioners of the prairie style of landscape architecture” (Grese 49).

Many nineteenth century gardeners experimented with exotic plant species that were still untested in the climates of the United States (Grese 21). However, Olmsted and the prairie landscape architects advocated the use of native plants. The difference between Olmsted and the prairie landscape architects in this respect is the extent to which each used native plants in their designs. Although Olmsted wrote about the use of native plants and the grouping of plants according to nature’s groupings, he was willing to use both native and exotic plant species.

In the selection of plants...Olmsted generally called for “American trees of the stateliest character” and a liberal use of native shrubs. An examination of the lists he compiled for the [Central Park] commissioners, however, demonstrates a willingness to use whatever plant he thought would achieve a particular effect rather than plants suited to particular soil conditions or found together in natural associations. (Grese 21)

Although Simonds and Jensen did use a majority of native plants, neither was a purist in this respect. Simonds believed in the occasional inclusion of plants that had been introduced and had become part of the rural or natural landscape, like the common lilac or apple tree (Gelbloom 17). Several of Jensen’s plans for Chicago’s West Park System, which he did not begin to design until 1906, show that he did not use solely native plants either (Gelbloom 17). However, both men advocated the use of plants native to the Midwest, and used an increasing percentage of these plants as their careers matured.

In the early 1900s, architects in Chicago were also looking to nature and the form of the midwestern landscape as inspiration for their designs. In his work, “Louis Sullivan exhibited sensitivity to the way a building hugged the earth and met the sky... Some, like Wright, often

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blurred the distinction between architecture and landscape architecture, designing both buildings and grounds” (Grese 44). Like the prairie style landscape architects:

[the] Prairie architects also used stratified materials and forms in the buildings they designed. Low-hung walls and roof overhangs made houses seem to merge with the surrounding landscape. Wright... further extended the lines of the houses into gardens, using terraces, pools, walls, and planting boxes; in their work, plants became important tools for linking houses to nature. By contrast, in Simonds’ and Jensen’s work, gardens most often maintained a separate identity from buildings, [creating a naturalistic setting, rather than blending the house into the landscape]. (Grese 47)

Although similarly inspired by the broadly flat or gently rolling landscape of the Midwest, Wright’s landscape design ideas didn’t necessarily agree with those of Olmsted or the prairie landscape architects.

Author Jack Quinan explores the question of how a Wright-designed house accommodates itself into an Olmsted Landscape. There are several of Wright’s Prairie houses in suburban neighborhoods designed by Olmsted. These include the Tomek and Coonley houses in Riverside, Illinois, and three houses in Buffalo, New York. The typical prairie style house has a cruciform plan, oriented to the four cardinal directions. In Wright’s designs, the grid of the house is extended into the landscape; although the masses of foliage around a Wright-designed home appear informal, they are contained in formal enclosures to compliment the home’s architectural form. With this in mind, Quinan demonstrates that Olmsted’s looping street patterns were especially troublesome to Wright. He concludes, “some of Wright’s finest work occurred in pure natural settings... where he did not have to concern himself with urbanity or suburbanity, the issues that so preoccupied Olmsted, but only nature itself” (61).

Jensen collaborated with prairie style architects on the design of two residences in Riverside: the Henry Babson House with Sullivan and the Avery Coonley House with Wright, both in the early 1900s. In some of the projects on which Jensen collaborated with Wright, including the Coonley house, it is unclear how much of the landscape design was actually Jensen’s work (Grese 47). Although they had great respect for each other’s work, their

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personalities and differing views on design made working together difficult. Catherine Howett explored the style of Wright with respect to the prairie style of landscape architecture:

[Jensen] considered flowerbeds an intrusion and relegated them to areas away from the house. He also preferred as few architectural elements in the landscape as possible... Jensen's results were inevitably less formal than Wright's and certainly less intimately related to the architecture... Comparing the garden of the Henry Babson estate (now destroyed), on which Jensen collaborated with Louis Sullivan, to the plan and view of Wright's house for Mr. and Mrs. Avery Coonley highlights this difference. The Babson house landscape was deliberately casual and soft edged; the reflection of the house in the pool seemed almost accidental; stepping from the formal porch onto the lawn must have been experienced as a passage into a serene natural landscape. If Jensen had anything to do with an early scheme for the Coonley residence, his work was probably confined to the ground at some distance from the house where the Des Plaines River meandered around the original edge of the property and the prairie landscape was powerfully suggested. But the plan demonstrates Wright's typical handling of the open spaces that the Prairie house embraces – sheltered courts, broad terraces, formal pools, and integral planting areas.” (36)

So how does one approach the treatment of the significant works of the prairie landscape architects and architects within the context of Olmsted and Vaux's design of Riverside? This is a question that residents and leaders of Riverside struggle with today. As explained above, the philosophy and designs of Olmsted and the prairie landscape architects are very compatible. Wright's work is not as compatible with either, but it is historically significant. Through their design for Riverside, Olmsted and Vaux allowed for the individual expression of architecture on private property. But to insure a graceful transition into the pastoral setting of Riverside's public landscape, they created generous setbacks, which they intended to be planted in a naturalistic manner. From the examination of Jensen's contribution to two prairie style residences in Riverside, it seems appropriate for a prairie style house to (1) exhibit a prairie style landscape as in the case of the Babson estate, or (2) include a garden with planting beds, walls and planters that extend the grid of the house into the landscape (in the style of Wright). However, this latter landscape treatment should, as Olmsted and Vaux intended, blend into the naturalistic style of the prairie landscape architects and Olmsted as one progresses from the house, across the setback and into the public spaces.