

Chapter 1
The Development of Landscape Architecture _____

Landscape Architecture is a profession that involves human interaction with nature. It entails human impacts upon the land, such as the shaping of landform and the creation of parks, urban spaces, and gardens. Landscape architecture can also include the mitigation of human impacts upon nature. For example, landscape architects are often involved with the restoration of or preservation of areas for wildlife and for the continued success of natural processes (i.e. stormwater collection and purification, groundwater recharge, water quality, the survival of native plants and plant communities, etc.). Landscape architecture is often inspired by social needs. Olmsted's work was a reaction to the uncleanly, overcrowded conditions of cities in the late nineteenth-century and the need for people to escape from these conditions and restore themselves in a natural setting. This same ethic inspires many of today's landscape architects who seek to provide safe, inviting parks within cities and to develop housing that responds to the needs of the residents. This housing could be in the form of improved public housing, developed through dialog with residents and informed by the successes and failures of past public housing trends. Landscape Architect's involvement with planning efforts range from complex and inspired plans such as Riverside in 1868 - 1869, Garden Cities (Radburn, NJ 1928), the Greenbelt town design of the 1930s, and today's ecologically and culturally sensitive development models, to the typical, ubiquitous, suburban developments that have evolved since the early twentieth century. The scope of landscape architecture ranges from broad projects (town planning and large, national parks) to narrow (small parks, urban plazas, commercial centers and residences). Olmsted's work encompassed all of these facets of landscape architecture.

Influencing Olmsted

The profession of landscape gardening and park design grew and changed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those involved with this profession were experimenting

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with new forms and styles in their designs. This experimentation ultimately guided the development of the emerging profession of landscape architecture. Direct lines of landscape design tradition and philosophy can be traced from Lancelot “Capability” Brown, William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Humphrey Repton in Europe and Andrew Jackson Downing, Olmsted and Vaux in America.

The development of landscape architecture was heavily influenced by design traditions cultivated in Europe, particularly in England. During the eighteenth century, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the formality of French gardens, which was reinforced by a newfound fascination with nature amongst English society. These factors became catalysts for a revolution towards picturesque landscape design. The English style of landscape gardening was the result of this revolution. (Grese 11).

During the eighteenth century, Lancelot “Capability” Brown demonstrated the influence of nature in English landscape design; by emphasizing gently rolling landforms, placid water surfaces, clumps of trees and wooded groves around a property’s border he sought to create a pastoral landscape that attempted to emulate uncultivated nature. Although Brown built over 170 private parks and gardens throughout his career, he wrote no treatises or books and was not well known to Olmsted, but his ideas on the landscape ignited a controversy amongst his contemporary designers that intensified after his death in 1783 (Rybczynski 180) (Grese 11).

One of the biggest proponents of the changing ideals of designed landscapes was Reverend William Gilpin who voiced his opinions in his manuscript *Remarks on Forest Scenery and Other Woodland Views*, which was published in 1791. Gilpin took notice of the unique qualities displayed by the landscape of different regions and felt that they should be preserved and enhanced, not designed to conform to formulaic landscapes like those produced and promoted by Brown. Sir Uvedale Price supported Gilpin’s opinions and elaborated on them in his work *An Essay on the Picturesque*. Through his work, Price became interested in developing a theory of picturesque principles (commonly used in paintings of the landscape) that could be applied in

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landscape gardening (Grese 12). He also worked to advance the virtues of an accidental picturesque landscape (Rybczynski 181). Both Gilpin and Price influenced Olmsted and promoted within him a connection to the English landscape that became integral to his future work as a landscape architect.

In contrast to Gilpin and Price, Humphrey Repton continued the landscape gardening traditions set by Brown. However, Repton responded to Brown's theory by emphasizing the importance of modeling landscape designs after nature, rather than pieces of artwork. He did this by developing a set of simple principals for designing for both convenience and beauty. These principals laid out conventions for working with grades, bodies of water, and vegetation. As seen in Olmsted's work, Repton promoted shaping the earth so that the grades appeared as if "art never interfered" (Grese 12). He also remarked on the importance of the subtleties that can be created through design, such as the treatment of the edge of woods and the manipulation of sunlight and shadow (Grese 12). Attention to subtleties, as defined by Repton, was also reflected in Olmsted's future designs.

Andrew Jackson Downing, a famous nurseryman and landscape gardener, continued the traditions of landscape gardening in America. Downing promoted an interest in the public to take pride in their landscape and the environment surrounding their home. A direct influence to Olmsted, Downing believed that the center of successful community design was a large public park and the ideal home was one that combined the amenities of the healthful aspects of country living and the cultural aspects associated with urban development (Grese 13). Downing's main contributions to the landscape gardening tradition were in written form. He edited a magazine, *The Horticulturist*, and published books such as *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America* and *Cottage Residences* (Rybczynski 65). It was through his writing that Downing influenced Olmsted. It was, in fact, *The Horticulturist* that first published Olmsted's writings on Birkenhead Park, which "encouraged the young farmer's [referring to Olmsted] literary endeavors" (Rybczynski 66).

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Olmsted, together with Calvert Vaux (who began his architectural career as an assistant to Downing), became the leader of the emerging field of landscape architecture. Olmsted was highly influenced by his English and American predecessors. During his career, Olmsted drew from their ideas, refined their design principles and applied them to his own landscape designs.

Olmsted's career was also heavily influenced by the urgent need for social reform in the mid 1800's. During this time, American cities saw pestilence and disease, which, when coupled with an outbreak of Cholera, prompted a desire for better sanitary conditions. Many of those who led the movement for social reform believed that incorporating open space and trees into the cities would help to restrict the spread of disease in the crowded urban developments. They also believed that being in contact with nature could revitalize the body, mind and soul. Johann Georg von Zimmerman, an eighteenth century physician, who advised his readers to find deep solace for the pains and melancholy of life in nature, further promoted these ideas. Olmsted was taken by Zimmerman's, *On Solitude*, stating that it was one of the best books ever written. This book served as a cornerstone for Olmsted's understanding of the importance of parks in urban areas for counteracting public health problems and promoting social equality. These ideas and principles of Olmsted's predecessors became the basis of Olmsted's philosophy on both landscape design and social justice, which guided his professional development as a landscape architect (Stevenson 27).