

Chapter 2

***Building the Profession:
Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux***

Frederick Law Olmsted

Landscape architecture is a broad profession that relies on the experience of many disciplines; this serves as a metaphor for Olmsted's life (1822-1903). In 1847, he began his adulthood as a farmer after several apprenticeships. He farmed for five years and at the same time pursued writing. After farming, he spent several years traveling through the South writing about slavery and the economic and social conditions there. In 1856, he became the Superintendent of Central Park in New York City, which eventually led to his partnership with Vaux and their submittal for the winning design of Central Park. In 1860, he became the Secretary of the United States Sanitation Commission (now known as the American Red Cross), which he helped to organize (Olmsted, Jr. 9). During this time he also continued his work with Vaux on Central Park. By 1863, he and Vaux had resigned as landscape architects for Central Park. Olmsted also resigned from the Sanitary Commission and began work for a mining company in California. Also in 1863, Olmsted, with Charles Eliot Norton, English clergyman Edwin Godkin, and others, founded the weekly review, *The Nation*. The following years found Olmsted busy with many landscape architecture projects in California and on the east coast. He and Vaux also resumed work on Central Park.

The success of Central Park led to commissions for other parks and interconnected park systems in New York City, as well as in many other cities including Buffalo (1868–1893), and Chicago (1870-1871, 1895). Although most renown for these park systems, Olmsted and Vaux also designed many subdivisions, such as Tarrytown Heights, NY (1871-1872), and developed master plans for cities and villages such as Brooklyn, NY (1868), and Riverside, IL (1868-1869, 1883). They also developed plans for the campuses of Harvard University, Vassar College, and others.

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Olmsted and Vaux's partnership ended in 1872. However, the two later collaborated on several park projects, including the Niagara Reservation at Niagara Falls, NY, and Morningside Park in New York City.

After his partnership with Vaux ended, Olmsted continued his practice, joined by his stepson, John Charles (J.C.) Olmsted, and later by Henry Sargeant Codman, Charles Elliott, and then by Olmsted's son Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. Olmsted and his partners were very busy with the park system for Boston (known as the Emerald Necklace) (1875-1894) and Rochester (1888-1893), the Druid Hills development in Georgia (1893), the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina (1888-1895), the U.S. Capitol grounds (1874-1893), and Stanford University in California (1886-1890). Olmsted also played a key role in the establishment of the National Park Service and published plans for the preservation of Yosemite Park (1865) and the reservation at Niagara Falls (1869-1887). Throughout his adulthood, he did much traveling to China, Europe, Canada, Mexico, and throughout the United States. Olmsted retired from professional practice in 1895. Olmsted's sight began to fail him and he developed a form of mental dementia (Rybczynski 408). He spent his final years as a patient at McLean's Institute, the grounds of which he had designed some years before (Fabos 6). His sons and other landscape architects continued the Olmsted firm until 1950. Albert Fein summarizes Olmsted's varied experiences, the success of which contributed to his favorable reputation:

Olmsted's opinion carried considerable weight. During the 1860's and 70's [sic] he had achieved the distinction of being America's foremost landscape architect and city planner. This reputation was based in part on his amazing technical achievements displayed in the design and construction of Central Park; a "master-plan" for the development of Brooklyn, then New York City's most important suburb; and a design in 1870 for Riverside, Illinois.... Equally important, however, was the consistent social theory explained in most of the written reports accompanying the designs. His reputation as a social scientist equaled his fame as a landscape architect. His published reports on the South had been favorably compared to Arthur Young's classic discussion of France on the eve of the French Revolution. As administrator of the Sanitary Commission, he had presented very cogent reasons for the Northern defeat at Bull Run.... A later report to the Secretary of War contained a complete analysis of the organization of the Commission and recommendations for its improvement which "won applause at home and administration abroad." In fact, his

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importance and fame as a landscape architect and city planner rested as much on his social thought as on his technical and administrative ability. His theory of urban design was generally acceptable to the political decision-makers of his day and understood by the informed public as well. (38-39)

As Fein explains, Olmsted's work was heavily inspired by his consistent social theory (38). Olmsted was very concerned about the polluted, overcrowded conditions of cities. Through his travels he saw these same conditions repeated in cities throughout Europe and America. He was inspired to design city parks to provide a respite from the city's unhealthy and demoralizing conditions. His ideals were extremely democratic; he espoused that these "natural" public areas (parks, parkways, suburbs) must be accessible to all citizens and within a reasonable distance from their homes and workplaces. In *Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns*, a speech delivered by Olmsted in 1870, Olmsted explains:

Air is disinfected by sunlight and foliage. Foliage also acts mechanically to purify the air by screening it. Opportunity and inducement to escape at frequent intervals from the confined and vitrified air of the commercial quarter, and to supply the lungs with air screened and purified by trees, and recently acted upon by sunlight, together with opportunity and inducement to escape from conditions requiring vigilance, weariness, and activity toward other men, —if these could be supplied economically, our problem would be solved. (15)

Olmsted's social theory was not Utopian; he did not espouse the "ideal city", nor did he try to impose a template upon the city, unlike later planners ("Why We Need Olmsted Again"). Rather his designs were unique to the site and responded to the individual attributes of that site and its cultural context.

The same social ideals that inspired Olmsted's city park systems led to his interest in the development of suburbs. Unlike today, suburbs in Olmsted's time were not far removed from the city. Instead they were within easy commuting distance and were often serviced by public transportation. The common modes of transportation at that time were horse and train. This proximity of suburbs to the city and railroad, coupled with improved design of streets, drainage, and public utilities, brought the best elements of the city to the suburb. Olmsted also provided for wide, landscaped parkways connecting the city and suburb; these parkways, like parks, provided

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areas for people to relax and socialize in a natural setting. Within the suburbs Olmsted designed large public areas, again to provide for relaxation and socialization, as well as to infuse the pastoral, rural landscape into the suburb.

It was undoubtedly Olmsted's rural background which led him to emphasize the introduction of "natural" elements in reforming the urban environment. But it would be inaccurate to characterize his point as either rural or antiurban. Rather, he hoped to fuse the best elements of both country and city into the new physical and social unit: the suburb. (Fein 37)

Many of Olmsted's projects, especially the city and national parks were affected by politics. According to Fein, Olmsted described the context of his work as social and political, occurring during a time when suffrage, temperance, and abolition were concerns and a time in which the city began to replace the countryside (47). Park reform ultimately engaged the support of three important groups—the cosmopolitan gentry, municipal politicians, and businessmen interested in speculative ventures in urban real estate and mass transit—which were frequently at each other's throats over issues confronting the city (Blodgett 877). Olmsted's opinion carried considerable weight (Fein 38).

Calvert Vaux

Along with Olmsted, Vaux (1822–1903) is considered "one of the pioneers of the field of landscape architecture in the United States" (Kowsky 43). He was born in London and there he apprenticed as an architect. In 1850, Vaux was introduced to Downing who was in London "seeking an architectural assistant for his expanding landscape gardening and domestic architectural practice" (Straka, Vaux 1). Vaux accompanied Downing to the United States and soon became a partner in Downing's practice in Newburgh, NY. Downing died an unfortunate death by drowning in 1852. Vaux and Frederick Clarke Withers, and English architect who had joined the firm earlier in 1852, continued the practice.

In 1857, Vaux moved his family and his practice to New York City. There he conducted an important architectural practice as a Gothic Revival architect. In addition, "his architectural

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practice expanded beyond the residential field and he became increasingly more involved in landscape design and urban planning” (Straka, Vaux 1). In “Calvert Vaux and the Architecture of Buffalo’s Parks,” Francis Kowsky writes that Vaux’s “experience, which was perhaps unmatched by anyone in the United States in the 1850s, put Vaux in an excellent position to take up the challenge of designing Central park” (44). In 1857, Vaux asked Olmsted invited Olmsted to collaborate on the design of Central Park. They established the firm, Olmsted, Vaux and Company.

As previously mentioned, Vaux and Olmsted ended their partnership in 1872. After this split, Vaux collaborated with several partners including Jacob Wrey Mould, another English-trained architect; George K. Radford, an English engineer; and Samuel Parsons, Jr. Vaux and Parson’s firm primarily practiced landscape architecture. “During 1881 to 1883 and from 1888 until his death, Vaux was the landscape architect for the New York City Park System” (Straka, Vaux 4).

The Partnership of Olmsted and Vaux

Vaux and Olmsted first met at Highland Garden, Downing’s home, in 1851, and their partnership began with their successful design of Central Park. Both men were highly involved in the design and construction supervision of the park. In his article about Calvert Vaux, Straka explains the responsibilities of each; he quotes from a letter that Olmsted wrote to Vaux in 1863. In the letter, Olmsted explains that Olmsted and Vaux were equally responsible for the general design, as well as for the details and superintendence that it involved. Olmsted credits the architectural design and superintendence entirely to Vaux, while claiming most of the credit for the organization and management of the construction force. Olmsted concluded by explaining that he considered the administration and management of the “public introduction to and use of the park” as his most valuable contribution, in which Vaux played little role (2).

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Eleven years after their submission of the design for Central Park, the firm of Olmsted, Vaux and Company prepared the *Preliminary Report upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside, Near Chicago*. Unlike the mutual effort that both men put into the design of Central Park, Vaux seems to have played less of a role in the design of Riverside. The editors of *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Volume VI*, explain that “surviving evidence indicates that Olmsted wrote this report in its entirety. Vaux had sailed for Europe on August 5, 1868. This printed Riverside Report is dated September 1, 1868. Later correspondence also indicates that Olmsted not only wrote this document without collaboration but also prepared site plans while Vaux was in England” (Schulyer 289). Vaux returned in November and may have had a hand in preparing the final Riverside plan, but it is unlikely that he could have changed the basic scheme that Olmsted had determined because the developers demanded the plats quickly (Schulyer 289). Because the firm was extremely busy and Vaux was in England, Olmsted hired additional help to complete the design of Riverside. John Bogart, an assistant engineer at Prospect Park, “probably surveyed the land and helped Olmsted determine the overall design of the suburban village. Olmsted also solicited assistance from his longtime associate Alfred J. Bloor on a “landscape project,” undoubtedly a reference to Riverside... The firm also opened an office in Chicago and sent Frederick C. Withers to oversee operations at Riverside” (Schulyer 292).

In light of the above information, our discussion in this report credits the overall concept and design of Riverside to Olmsted and Vaux, partners of the firm that published the *Preliminary Report* and *General Plan of Riverside, 1869*. However, in our discussion of Riverside’s design principles, we credit these design *details* to Olmsted. This credit seems justified as many of the design principles Olmsted utilized at Riverside were repeated in his prior and subsequent designs and became a trademark of his landscape architectural style.