

**Chapter 5**

***Creating a Suburban Village:  
Olmsted's Design Principles in Riverside*** \_\_\_\_\_

Olmsted developed a palette of design elements and features visible in many of his landscapes. This palette developed as a result of many social influences as discussed previously, but most notably the English style of landscape gardening, his experiences at Birkenhead Park, and the writings of Downing. From his first designs with Vaux at Central Park to the suburban community at Riverside, one can observe the pattern by which Olmsted utilized his palette to achieve specific design goals. The principles guiding Olmsted's designs have been studied in depth in many other written works; it is the goal of this project to identify the principles evident specifically in Riverside. These principles are evident in the Olmsted and Vaux's original design for Riverside and are still evident in the Riverside landscape today. We will also discuss the way in which Olmsted and Vaux used the principles to achieve their design goals and to produce an *experience* or *feeling* related to the landscape.

Our goal is to increase the understanding of these design principles through the use of a variety of visual media, specifically drawings and three-dimensional models. Some previous studies of Riverside have provided written examples and descriptions of significant features, but visual resources, combined with written explanations, are far more effective for communicating design principles to the general public. The visual media produced shall be given to the Riverside community for educational use.

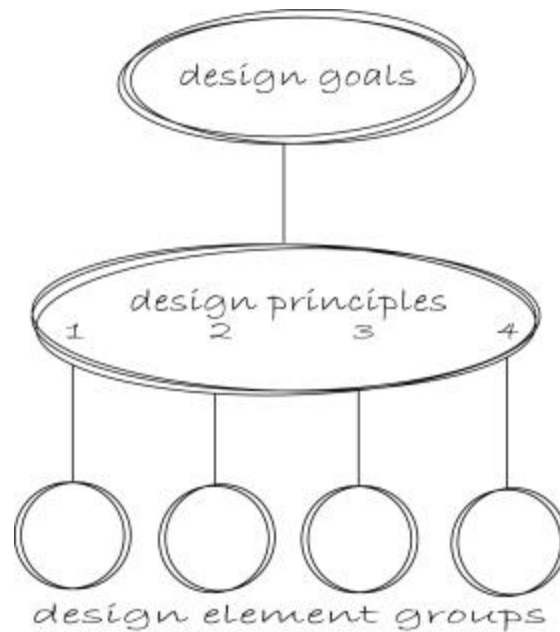
Olmsted and Vaux's vision of Riverside is defined by specific *goals*. They intended to create a "Suburban Village" (goal 1) by *blending the countryside with the urban environments* (goal 2) and *developing an organization of open space and views* (goal 3). Doing so enabled Olmsted and Vaux to create a place that took advantage of the best characteristics that the city and the country had to offer. These *goals* were achieved through the application of general

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*design principles*. After several site visits and a lengthy literature review, we organized Olmsted and Vaux's design for Riverside around the following *design principles*:

1. *the choreography of views,*
2. *the fostering of improved health and convenience,*
3. *provisions for open space, and*
4. *the preservation and enhancement of natural features.*

These four *design principles* are then implemented through the use of specific *design elements*. Some of the specific elements utilized by Olmsted can be used to support multiple design principles, all of which are discussed below. A conceptual diagram that represents this argument is provided below to increase the clarity and understanding of Olmsted's design hierarchy as interpreted by this project team.



**Figure 1. Hierarchy of Design Vocabulary**

### *Choreography of Views*

Olmsted utilized the concept of perspective at multiple scales in order to draw one's eye into the landscape and create an emotional response within the "viewer." They intended to create

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a place different from Chicago and other large cities. With regard to the design of roads and streets, Olmsted wrote:

“the ordinary directness of line in town streets, with its resultant regularity of plan, would suggest eagerness to press forward, with out looking to the right hand or left, we should recommend...gracefully curved lines, generous spaces, and the absence of sharp corners, the idea being to suggest and imply leisure, contemplativeness, and happy tranquility” (Olmsted, Vaux & Co. 17 ).

The project team has defined this as the “choreography of views” because of the importance of *movement* through the landscape to create an *experience*. Whether traveling on Longcommon Road or walking in the open spaces of Scottswood Common and Swan Pond, the resulting experience is similar because of Olmsted’s attention to the details and use of specific design elements. He was able to successfully manipulate these different scales of design (from the overall road alignment to the awareness of leaf texture) in order to create “mystery” within a landscape.

Olmsted and Vaux designed the Long Common as the “keystone” of the Riverside plan (The Frederick Law Olmsted Society of Riverside 6). As the intended main entry for people traveling from Chicago to Riverside along the proposed parkway, it would be the first exposure to Olmsted and Vaux’s overall design. Therefore, the sequence of entry is a crucial component of Olmsted and Vaux’s vision. The curved roads and lack of perpendicular intersections create an organization of “triangle parks,” and movement along Longcommon Road from Harlem Avenue creates a pattern of viewsheds. In “Another and different look at the General Plan of Riverside, 1869,” Edward 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:

As we proceed along Longcommon Road on a further extension of the tree-lined curving road, we approach at Kent Road another triangular island on the left, adjacent to Longcommon Road. As our eyes focus on this island we travel a bit farther and encounter another large landscaped triangle on the right. As these two island diminish and disappear, we approach another small island on the left and as we proceed further we reach Delaplaine Road and this

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triangle disappears and we suddenly reach and experience the bursting forth of the broad openness of the Longcommon public land. (8)

It is clear that Olmsted and Vaux have achieved their goals of a leisurely experience in the language used by Straka. Additionally, the use of the words “approach,” “encounter,” “disappear,” and “suddenly” reveals Olmsted and Vaux’s success in creating mystery within the landscape as part of their greater vision.

The placement of vegetation combined with road alignment contributes to the “choreography” of the landscape as experienced by Riverside’s residents. Olmsted remarked on many other park settings (i.e. Birkenhead Park and Central Park) and thoroughly considered the treatment of vegetation in those sites. He intended to place trees in such a way that “all absolute limits should be so screened from view by trees that the imagination will be likely to assume no limit” (Beveridge and Hoffman 154). Additionally, Olmsted believed that “trees are to be regarded as individuals, and as component parts of groups, which groups are again to be regarded both individually, and in relation one to another as components of landscapes as seen from special points of view” (Beveridge and Hoffman 55). With this, Olmsted described the importance of considering the landscape as an experience that is best understood by moving through it.

The project team has identified and compiled the following list of specific elements in the Riverside landscape that contribute to the “choreography of views”:

- *Roads and walks designed with curving alignment*
- *Absence of sharp corners and perpendicular intersections*
- *Irregular masses of trees and shrubs*
- *Use of plantings to frame, block, or terminate views*
- *Use of plantings to create rooms and secret spaces within the larger landscape*
- *Alternating light and shade patterns*
- *Visual access to and across public open spaces*
- *Variation in vegetative texture and color*

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### *Preserve and Enhance Natural Features*

Olmsted addressed the “intrinsic quality” of Riverside’s location and landscape in order to inform his design decisions. Following his visit to Riverside in August of 1968, he believed he would be able to utilize two significant landscape features within the site to organize Riverside’s design: the Des Plaines River and the glacial Lake Calumet beach ridge. The beach ridge had been used as a road since 1833 as part of the first stagecoach route from Chicago to St. Louis. Its slight elevation above the surrounding landscape and porous substrate provided a more convenient route upon which to travel. The road had been initially named Barry Point Road, and is currently known as Long Common Road. In the Preliminary Report on Riverside, Olmsted recommends “the appropriation of some of the best of your property for public grounds” (28). The spaces defined by Olmsted to provide for these public grounds still exist today as the Long Common, Scottswood Common, Swan Pond, and Indian Gardens. Both Long Common and Scottswood Common align themselves with the glacial beach ridge—this landform consists of sandy soils, and would therefore best serve as a place for people to recreate without concern for unpleasant and inconvenient wet areas. Indian Gardens was specifically designated as open space in a letter written by Olmsted to his wife Mary following the site visit in 1869 (Schulyer 266).

It was Olmsted’s intention to produce a landscape that presented itself as a coherent whole. In “Frederick Law Olmsted’s Theory of Landscape Design,” Charles Beveridge discusses Olmsted’s desire for his designs to “remain true to the character of their natural surroundings” (42). With this in mind, Olmsted made specific choices for the types of plantings and trees in Riverside, as well as their arrangement in the landscape. He paid particular attention to the ways in which species would interact with each other—in his words, to achieve an “agreeable association.” (Hubbard 288). In a letter to Emery Childs, President of the Riverside Improvement Company, Olmsted emphasizes his desire to avoid formality in terms of plantings as a contrast to city environments. He, in fact, educates Childs as to the growing acceptance of the “natural style” as a “great improvement” over the more formal style (Hubbard 290). The naturalistic style

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of design originating in England was very much complemented by the increased interest in the study of ecology with respect to plant communities and the use of native species.

The project team has identified and compiled the following list of specific elements in the Riverside landscape that contribute to the preservation and enhancement of natural features:

- *Reserve the “best” of the site for public use*
- *Choice of plant materials*
  - *Preference for native plants*
  - *Non-natives used with discretion*
  - *Avoidance of showy and formal floral displays*
- *Arrange plants in naturalistic, not formal or geometric, groupings*
- *River used as an organizing element*

### **Provisions for Open Space**

Access to and consideration of open space as an amenity was extremely important in Olmsted’s vision of a village. In contrast to the condition of cities at the time of Riverside’s development, Olmsted’s design was centered on the availability of open space to all residents. The advantages to the country lifestyle would be the increased “purity of air” and “facilities for quiet out-of-door recreation” (Olmsted, Vaux & Co 7). The health benefits to open space in residential environments were of importance to many people after the civil war and during the period of industrial revolution that followed. In the Preliminary Report Upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside, Olmsted references an address at the British Association for the Advancement of Social Science in which the “mere proximity of dwellings” in urban environments will result in “nervous feebleness,” “irritability,” or “various functional derangements” (6). It was therefore crucial for Olmsted to provide the residents of the suburb with an amount of open space that contributed to personal mental and physical health. Therefore, the concept of open space was not only considered to be those areas of public access, such as the Long Common, Scottswood Common, and the many triangle parks, but also spaces within and adjacent to private residential lots. In his address to the American Social Science Association, Olmsted stated: “probably the advantages of civilization can be found illustrated and

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demonstrated under no other circumstances so completely as in some suburban neighborhoods where each family abode stands fifty or a hundred feet or more apart from all others, and at some distance from the public road” (9).

Access to public open space is an important characteristic in many Olmsted designs. During his visit to Birkenhead Park, at Liverpool, England, he was impressed with the function of open space in a suburban environment. It, too, served as a contrast to existing conditions in English cities and offered a healthier, more sanitary environment. In *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, published more than fifteen years before his involvement in the Riverside project, Olmsted writes of Birkenhead Park, “all this magnificent pleasure ground is entirely, unreservedly, and for ever, the people’s own” (54). Public access to open space contributes to the value of a suburban development—not only for the residents of a place, but also for the developers seeking to create attractive suburbs. This value is apparent today with the evolution of cluster development and the importance placed on conservation suburb design. Some significant examples of suburban design after Riverside will be discussed in Chapter Nine, *Riverside and the Continuum of Community Design*.

Olmsted and Vaux also used topography to contribute to the perception of greater open space thereby providing *visual* access in addition to the *physical* access created by good roads and walks. With a technique used in Central Park, sunken roads provided an opportunity to clearly delineate spaces appropriate for vehicles while leaving the long view across open space free from distraction. As a result, one’s perception of the size of park-like landscapes was increased. Additionally, when looking from one’s home, the home landscape blended seamlessly into the park, creating the perception that one’s home was located in the rural countryside.

The project team has identified and compiled the following list of specific elements in the Riverside landscape that contribute to the provision for, and perception of, open space:

- *100’ Lot frontage*
- *30’ Minimum setback*
- *Visual and physical access to public open spaces*

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- *Organization and placement of triangle parks*
- *Sunken roads*
- *Roads and walks designed with curving alignment*
- *Absence of sharp corners and perpendicular intersections*

### *Fostering Improved Health and Convenience*

As discussed previously, Olmsted's attitude toward the condition of cities and society clearly influenced his design decisions. Olmsted recognized the benefits to city living with regard to cultural and educational ("civilized") opportunities, but like other social reformers at the time believed that city conditions were unhealthful. He supported the Riverside Improvement Company's proposal to create a viable, suburban environment for Chicagoans. He sought to create places that concerned both people and their environments—an approach Norman Newton refers to as producing a "psycho-somatic balance" (Newton 101). On February 25, 1870 in an address to the American Social Science Association at the Lowell Institute, Boston, Olmsted presented a potential solution to the ills of the city:

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 vitiated 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, wariness, and activity toward other men, —if these could be supplied economically, our problem would be solved. (Public Parks 15)

He utilized urban conveniences and infrastructure to ameliorate the perceived hardships to country living; he was adamant that "an arrangement of this kind must be considered absolutely indispensable" (Olmsted, Vaux & Co 21). Knowing that the men of Riverside would most likely commute to the city for employment, it would be the women and children who would experience everyday life in the rural countryside. Until Olmsted's design of Riverside, he felt that typical rural living required "country women and girls" to be "far more confined in their habits by the walls of their dwelling...because they have been obliged to train and adapt themselves during a large part of the year to an avoidance of the annoyances and fatigue of going out" (Olmsted, Vaux



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& Co 19). He intended to remove difficulties of traveling on muddy, crowded streets and walks and instead provide women the opportunity for leisurely walks—often taken with small children and pushing baby carriages.

The existing landscape conditions in Riverside and Chicago in the late nineteenth Century supported Olmsted and Vaux’s specifications for proper construction of walks and roads that were both “decent and convenient” with a “cleanliness and smoothness of surface” (Olmsted, Vaux & Co 17). The soils in this area of northern Illinois are poorly drained due to the existence of glacial lacustrine and morainal sediments. The high percentage of clay in these soils prevented adequate drainage and resulted in a large number of wetland and marsh environments, and consequently became enemies to the wagon wheel. Many travelers in the mid-1800s experienced these difficult travel conditions until the construction of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroad. The proposed grand parkway linking Chicago to Riverside was also intended to improve travel conditions from city to suburb. The importance of the proposed parkway and its construction was addressed at length in the Preliminary Report for Riverside. The parkway was viewed by Olmsted and Vaux as a vital component to the “metropolitan condition.” In other words, metropolitan areas could only function successfully if there was thoughtful integration and consideration of the city and the suburb as a single entity—one cannot exist without the other. In his 1870 address to the American Social Science Association in Boston, he stated:

The construction of good roads and walks, the laying of sewer water, and gas pipes, and the supplying of sufficiently cheap, rapid, and comfortable conveyances to town centers is all that is necessary to give any farming land in a healthy and attractive situation the value of town lots (Public Parks 10).

The project team has identified and compiled the following list of specific elements and techniques in the Riverside landscape that contribute to the “improved health and convenience” of the residents:

- *Walks and roads designed and constructed for positive drainage*
- *Public utilities and infrastructure (water and gas lighting)*
- *600’ to public open space from any residence*

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- *Transportation to urban centers via parkway and railroad*
- *Generous lot sizes*
- *Separation of uses:*
  - *Walking paths from driving*
  - *Active from passive recreation spaces*
  - *Living from working environments*

### Summary

It is the strength of these design principles and elements in their historic context as executed within the Riverside landscape that creates a unique experience. As was previously mentioned, it is important to represent these design principles in graphic form in addition to traditional written methods. Appendix 1 presents these design principles in a clear and organized manner. Individual design elements are illustrated in plan and perspective drawings. Graphic products given to the Village of Riverside introduce these design principles in an interactive format, in which concepts are built with the addition of an element at a time. These design principles and elements are also linked physically in the form of small flags to the two models produced of the Long Common and Scottswood Common. Photos of the models also illustrating particular design principles are located in Appendix 2.

With the passage of time, many additional elements—both in landscape and in architecture—have been introduced into Riverside’s design vocabulary. The evolution of ideas related to ecology and sustainability in the field of landscape architecture call in to question the compatibility of such elements within a National Historic Landmark. These challenges are discussed in the following chapters. Chapter 7, *Design Giants in Riverside* addresses the works of noted architect Frank Lloyd Wright and prairie style landscape architect Jens Jensen within Riverside. *The Reflection* acknowledges the current trend of ecology sensitive communities as it relates to Riverside.