



Riverside, IL, has long been recognized as one of the most significant residential developments of the nineteenth century. The suburb was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1970, and Olmsted's influential report describing the plan can be found in Volume 6 of the Olmsted Papers, "The Years of Olmsted, Vaux & Company" (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Perhaps less known today are the continued contributions of the Olmsted Brothers firm to town and city planning in the United States. By the early twentieth century, John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920) and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (1870-1957) were laying out major residential subdivisions all over the country. The work of their firm helped standardize procedures for the design of new suburbs and towns, as well as policies for the expansion and improvement of existing cities. When founded in 1917, the American Institute of Planners elected Olmsted Jr. as its first president.

The following excerpts, suggested by scholars Arleyn A. Levee and Susan L. Klaus, are just two examples from the Olmsted Brothers extensive body of planning work. The 1916 report for Anchorage, KY, was written by John Charles Olmsted toward the end of his career. He

had been active in the area since 1891 when he began planning the Louisville park and parkway system with his stepfather. Anchorage was a suburb of Louisville, and the report was paid for by I.W. Bernheim, a successful businessman and philanthropist who owned property in Anchorage and hoped to see the town prosper through sound planning.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. described the planning of Palos Verdes Hills in 1929, seven years after he began working on the project. John Charles had been the first member of the firm involved, but World War I delayed the development and his younger half brother subsequently took over. Olmsted Jr. undertook other important work in California during the 1920s. He traveled the state extensively to prepare the California state park plan, published in 1929, and he served on the Yosemite Board of Expert Advisors beginning in 1928.

The following excerpts give just a small inkling of the planning expertise the Olmsted Brothers firm, including associates Percival Gallagher, James F. Dawson, and Edward C. Whiting, developed during this time. Scores of projects like these are part of the legacy of Riverside and its influence on professional planning in the United States.

Ethan Carr, Reprints Editor

**John Charles Olmsted,
"Town of Anchorage,
Kentucky: Possibilities for
Future Development"**

Louisville, 1916

STREETS

For convenience and to avoid vagueness streets should be considered in classes, say four classes. In determining upon the width of any proposed street or in widening or paving an existing street it should first be determined after due discussion, which class it is to be put in – then it can be more safely determined what its width and the width of its subdivisions should be. The matter is of such vital importance in providing for the future growth of the town that private landowners should not be permitted to determine streets without the consent of the Town Trustees in this matter. It is best to avoid designating the classes of streets by number. It would not help real estate to advertise a lot for sale as situated on a third or fourth-class street.

The streets of the widest class may be called boulevards if formal and uniform in cross section, or parkways if informal and embodying some more or less naturalistic feature, such as a brook. The boulevard form should usually be adopted where there is a steam or electric railway to be included. The parkway form should be adopted where a brook is to be permanently kept open. Both boulevards and parkways should be wide enough to include a central reservation with a paved roadway and a sidewalk and tree strip on each side of it.

A main street (often called avenue) is one which has, or may eventually have, a good deal of through traffic or which is so long and so likely to be lined thickly with houses and stores that local traffic will be inconvenienced in time, if the roadway is not wide enough for an electric railway or for two streams of rapidly moving vehicles and two streams of slowly moving vehicles in addition to vehicles standing at the curb line, say 54 feet. Such main streets are usually 80 or 100 feet in width. As a general rule it is bad policy to have car tracks in a street less than 80 feet or in a roadway less than 54 feet wide.

Local streets will vary more in their requirements according to their length, the existing or anticipated frequency of houses and stores along them and their nearness to the street. The general consensus of opinion appears to be that a local street of liberal width should normally have a roadway wide enough for three lines of vehicles. In practice, this means a width of from 24 to 30 feet.

BROOK PARKWAYS

When it is a question of dealing with natural brooks, the usual engineering solution is to put them into vitrified tile pipes or concrete culverts or drains or walled open ditches. But the expense of doing this is so great and so objectionable to landowners and taxpayers that the construction of such drains is usually postponed until conditions have so changed that there is no practicable alternative. In many cases a more intelligent way of dealing with natural brooks in a town would be for the landowners and town to cooperate in devising a system of brook parkways, that is to say, laying out reservations in which the brooks can be permanently retained as naturalistic park-like features or as formal, open channels with sloping grassy sides. The larger

the brook the greater the advantage of an open channel.

It is not to be assumed that if a town takes the land for brook parkways by the right of eminent domain and pays what landowners with the aid of expensive lawsuits may compel the town to pay, brook parkways are cheaper, in such cases as Anchorage has, than walled ditches or concrete pipes in the narrowest possible rights-of-way, or under existing public streets. It is, however, the part of wisdom for landowners to do what they reasonably can in favor of brook parkways. Take the case of Owl Creek for example. There is a street part of the way on one side and the rest of the way on the other side of the brook. While residence properties on the offside of the brook remain large, it is an easy matter and not unduly costly to carry a private drive from the street across the brook on a little bridge. It may be made a picturesque and attractive feature well worth what it would cost. But suppose some landowners wish to subdivide the land across the brook into comparatively small lots, say from fifty to seventy-five feet wide. They will try to get a new street put through not close to the brook but parallel with it and far enough away from it for one row of lots backing on the brook. That is a bad arrangement as a matter of public policy. It is only a question of time before lot owners will be filling the low land with ashes and refuse and backing outbuildings toward the older street across the brook which now is one of the pleasantest drives in the town. A valuable asset of landscape beauty now possessed by the town would gradually be ruined and its park value wantonly thrown away, and eventually the town would be involved in the tremendous expense of treating the brook in some engineering way. The intelligent policy for the town and landowners to adopt is to arrange by deeds of gift or possibly in certain cases some relatively trifling pay or by an agreement by which the town would assume some part of the future construction expense, for making a strip of sufficient width into a parkway reservation or public park with a second street along this side opposite the older street. With the land in such large tracts as now exist, the landowner would be losing little of saleable value and might be allowed to continue to use the land as pasture for some years. All the town would lose for many years would be the taxes which would be a cheap price for saving the picturesque and economical natural brook.

**Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.,
“How We Planned Palos
Verdes Hills,” in *American
Civic Annual*, Harlean James, ed.**

Washington, D.C.: American Civic Association, 1929, 227-231.

The 25 square miles of Palos Verdes Hills form a bold, isolated mass, rising tier above tier to nearly 1,500 feet above the surf-washed base of the cliffs which marks a projecting “knuckle” in the coast of California at the southwest corner of the Los Angeles plain. ...

The human requirements were simply to provide for the pleasantest possible dwelling-places, with all the accessories suitable thereto – means of access, utilities, stores, churches, clubs, hotels, schools, playgrounds, parks – and to avoid everything that would not contribute to the comforts and amenities of life, so far as such alien things could by foresight and ingenuity be avoided. The houses to be provided for were conceived as ranging from the inexpensive to the palatial; but predominately for fairly prosperous people wanting detached houses with a garden setting but unwilling to burden themselves with the care of extensive grounds – predominately people who would want lots ranging from about 60 by 125 feet to an acre or so in extent. In addition, moderate areas were needed near the local business centers for apartments and for the characteristic California institution of “bungalow courts,” which are small and compact groups of dwelling units, usually detached.

The community, or series of communities, was conceived not as self-sufficient and self-supporting like the English Garden cities, but as in part suburban, for people working in Los Angeles.

The first step in making the preliminary general plan of the 16,000 acres was a double one: (A) Selecting the areas naturally adapted for certain special types of use, particularly (1) business centers and the more intensive uses associated therewith and (2) playground sites, both of which require flattish land, (3) golf courses, requiring another distinct type of land, (4) canyons and steep hillsides suitable for park use but intractable for residential development unless

as landscape adjuncts of rather large estates; (B) selecting the routes for main thoroughfares for access to and between the business centers and other use-areas. The topographic limitations upon the location of thoroughfares, especially those climbing to the upper levels, exerted a considerable influence on the location of the local community centers. Rights-of-way for a few main lines of electric railway were studied, partly within main thoroughfares but partly separate in order to maintain lighter maximum gradients with a view to handling local freight.

The main features of the plan were: three main traffic entrances from the east and three from the north, with subsidiaries; a main broad circuit thoroughfare, generally on easy gradients, serving the lowest principal bench around the coast but keeping well back from the shore except where topography prohibited; a main thoroughfare climbing from the north, generally at 4 per cent or less, to the topmost plateau and ridge; a series of about ten inter-connecting secondary thoroughfares with maximum gradients of 5 to 7 per cent connecting top and bottom and giving access to intermediate lands; a parkway along the coast and a number of crest and hillside parkways; six major business centers and town-sites and numerous smaller business centers; liberal tentative reservations for sites for the combined purpose of school, playground, and neighborhood park, spaced suitably for schools in a community of the estimated maximum density, of golf-course sites, and of canyon, hillside, and shore-bluff parks. The faces of the cliffs and bluffs along the entire coastline of 12 miles, together with the narrow margin of beaches and rocky shores at their base, were tentatively assigned for park purposes. ...

As a part of street locations in the preliminary plan, controlling tentative gradients were established, with constant regard for the effect on abutting property and for the handling of stormwater, the intention being to divert the latter at frequent intervals into canyons and other natural drainage channels reserved for the purpose, so as to avoid any general necessity for stormdrains other than culverts. Where the land was fairly uniform in character and small lots were contemplated, the shape and size of blocks and economy of street construction mainly determined local street locations, as in most subdivisions. But in many localities, where the topography was irregular and the value



left: Early view looking toward the Pacific across the developing Malaga Cove residential district (from photograph collection, Job # 5950, Olmsted National Historic Site).

right: Aerial view in 1927 of road and village layout for Malaga Cove and Montemalaga districts, Palos Verdes (Frederick Law Olmsted, "Palos Verdes Estates," *Landscape Architecture* 17, July 1927, p. 254).

of house-sites would be determined largely by the quality of views or by other special attractions, the best house-sites were first picked out regardless of any preconception of where the streets were to run, and the street locations were then devised, so far as practicable, to leave these superior sites intact and give convenient access to them while reasonably subdividing the remaining land.

Concurrently with the determination of local streets and lotting, a zoning plan was made. On account of the great extent of the area, although its prime purpose was residential throughout, provision was made in limited districts not only for ordinary retail business centers and for public garages, but also in a few places for semi-nuisance uses, such as warehouses and lumber-yards, surrounded by a narrow strip reserved for screening plantations.

The maximum degree of architectural control is exercised over the business lots around the plaza. A complete preliminary architectural design was made for each plaza, and purchasers of the several lots are permitted to build only in accordance with this design, or such harmonious modification of the design as a whole as may be approved at the time when final plans of the successive building are prepared to meet the detailed requirements of individual owners. Furthermore, the project retains the right to complete the Plaza façade, with its arcade, across the front of

any lot that may be left vacant and to assess the cost of such construction on the lot-owner. Subject to these conditions, practically all the business lots have been sold at good prices. One unit-building in one plaza is completed and fully rented.

The regulations governing use, height, and open-space requirements on all lots are not essentially different from first-rate zoning regulations under the police power, although more complete than usual and applied by covenant; but the control of the appearance of private improvements elsewhere than around the plazas, by means of the now-familiar requirement of approval of plans, embodies some special features.

The first is that of a paid Art Jury of technical competence, maintained by a permanent endowment fund, and acting with the advice of the landscape architects of the project, to pass upon all plans submitted; and the second is a sort of architectural zoning to indicate the criteria which will be used by the Art Jury in approving and disapproving designs. Definite architectural "types" appropriate to different parts of the property were established in the protective restrictions. They were defined and visualized by publishing for each type a considerable number of photographs of existing buildings in southern California approved as typical by the Art Jury.