



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION *for*  
OLMSTED  
PARKS

# REPRINTS

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In the early twentieth century, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. was a principal figure in establishing the profession of city planning. Between 1905 and 1915, he produced city planning reports for seven cities, including two at the request of the Pittsburgh Civic Commission. Olmsted was retained to suggest both immediate “necessary improvements and a comprehensive improvement program for the next twenty-five years.” His 1910 study, *PITTSBURGH: Main Thoroughfares and the Down Town District*, included recommendations for upgrading and rationalizing the street system, proposals for public buildings and boulevards in the central city, and suggestions for improvements to primary residential and industrial districts.

In addition to this vast undertaking, which addressed the renewal of older parts of the city, Olmsted broadened his charge to include suburban and regional planning. He advised the city’s leaders to look “to the wise and economical layout of what remains to be done, especially in the outskirts of the city where the major part of the city’s growth is bound to occur.” Prevention is cheaper than the cure, he admonished, and “the city plan is daily taking shape out of nothing, whether it is intelligently designed or not.” Olmsted recommended the creation of an administrative agency empowered to take a regional approach to planning, observing that the city was most likely to grow by the annexation of developing suburban areas.

Olmsted’s city planning reports looked beyond matters of physical design and manipulation of the urban landscape to raise issues of social concern. From the time of his work on the 1901 McMillan Commission plan for Washington, D.C.’s monumental core, Olmsted’s city planning reports always included proposals for a network of park and recreation areas that should be accessible to all residents through parkways and public transportation. In the following excerpt from the 1910 Pittsburgh report, Olmsted advocates for a park or playground within a quarter-mile of every home, a concept that became an important tenet of Progressive Era city planning and was popularized during the 1920s as the Neighborhood Unit concept. It was the city’s responsibility to provide parks, supervised playgrounds, libraries and field houses “that set a good example for the neighborhood” close

by the homes of “children and women of the wage-earning families.” These citizens had the most need for healthful recreation and the least ability to travel to find it.

This selection illustrates Olmsted’s attention to the smallest detail. In addition to recommending a metropolitan street system, making proposals for a civic center, and designating far-flung parcels of land that could be linked into a regional park system, Olmsted thought deeply about the fine points of how the people would use neighborhood parks and what needed to be done to assure that they were able to enjoy them fully.

*Guest Editor: Susan L. Klaus, Chair, NAOP Leadership Council*



(top) Schenley Park Visitor Center, built in the early 1900s and restored by the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy in 2001; (bottom) Historic view of the Schenley Park Visitor Center, originally built as a picnic shelter

*Photos courtesy of Melissa McMasters and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy*

**From: Frederick Law Olmsted, "Pittsburgh: Main Thoroughfares and the Down Town District". Adopted by the Pittsburgh City Commission December 1910. Published Pittsburgh, 1911.**

### *General Discussion Of Parks*

In any city closely built over a large area, public parks or recreation grounds become one of the most urgent civic needs, if the health and vigor of the people are to be maintained. And the most important classes to provide for are the children and the women of the wage-earning families; most important, not only because of their numbers and of the direct influence of their health and vigor upon the efficiency of the coming generation, but also because they, least of all, have energy and opportunity to seek out healthful recreation at a distance. Normally it requires two distinct kinds of recreation grounds to supply the needs of these people, — the local or neighborhood park for frequent and regular use, and the rural park for occasional holiday enjoyment.

### *Neighborhood Parks*

The size and form and character most desirable for neighborhood recreation grounds depend upon the functions to be performed by each. Some of the activities in the best developed playgrounds, as for example in Chicago, are these: (1) The playing of little children in sand-piles and upon the lawn, under the watchful guidance of an attendant who not only keeps them out of danger and mischief, but plays with them, tells them stories and stimulates the healthy activity of their little minds and bodies. Here the mothers may come with their children and remain to watch them play or leave them in safety. A plot one hundred feet square may be of value for such uses. (2) For boys of larger growth and men and for girls and women, the more active games with and without apparatus, in the open air and under cover, always with opportunity and inducement to bathe, and, if possible, with a swimming-pool. Sometimes space is found for the big field games and regular athletic sports on a running track; sometimes for nothing that takes more space than basketball. (3) For the older and the less active



*(top) Frick Park gatehouse at Reynolds Street, designed by Innocenti and Webel and restored by the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy in 2000; (bottom) Historic view of the Frick Park gatehouse at Reynolds Street, designed by Innocenti and Webel, undated photo*

*Photos courtesy of Melissa McMasters and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy*

people, pleasant shaded walks for strolling and benches to sit upon amid agreeable surroundings, with opportunity to see the youngsters play, and once or twice a week, perhaps, to enjoy a band concert. (4) For the use of all, a field house where the sanitary accommodations are kept to a standard of cleanliness and order that sets a good example to the neighborhood, where a reading-room branch of the public library is available, and in which one or more large rooms are at the disposal of the

neighborhood for lectures, entertainments and dances. Clean, healthy recreation may thus be given full play amid decent surroundings instead of being driven to saloons, to vicious or questionable dance-halls and other baneful establishments for the commercial exploitation of the spirit of play.

Of perhaps first importance in the planning of local parks is the problem of distribution — accessibility to the people served. Practically there are few women or small children who will take the trouble habitually to walk much more than a quarter of a mile to a playground or local park for exercise or rest, and for most a carfare is out of the question. This means that, ideally, there should be neighborhood recreation centers not more than a quarter or at most a half mile from every home in the city. As for the total area desired for local parks, it is so seldom possible to get enough that there is little danger of overdoing the purchase; and the extremely limited experience of any of our cities renders any definite figures on the subject decidedly misleading. But there is a rather general consensus of opinion that about 5 per cent of the total city area is a reasonable minimum allowance to be devoted to local parks, playgrounds, and squares, and that more than 10 per cent may be uneconomic.

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In Pittsburgh the questions of size and distribution of local parks must be considerably affected by the topographical conditions. The city and the contiguous boroughs are, to a certain extent, subdivided into hilltop and valley communities, close together it may be, but nevertheless isolated one from the other by almost precipitous hillsides from one hundred to four or five hundred feet in height. These communities are sometimes

very small and are frequently very irregular in shape, as, for instance, when confined to the bottom of a narrow valley only two or three hundred feet in width and a mile or two in length. And even on those hillsides where a less severe topography does not actually stop development, it may still make intercommunication so difficult and laborious that the upper portion is practically separated from the lower.

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Under such conditions it is certain that a comparatively small recreation center is the most suitable local park unit, especially in the rougher portions of the Pittsburgh District. In Chicago and other cities of normally flat topography, such advantages have been found in grouping related activities — economy in maintenance and operation, and increase of efficiency per thousand of population served — that, other things being equal, reasonably large park units, probably twenty acres or more in extent, are considered more desirable than the same total area split into a larger number of small scattered squares. But the conditions in Pittsburgh are peculiar. Here each isolated community, no matter how small, needs its local park; every portion of the long, narrow valley settlement should be near a park; and hillside settlements at distinct levels should have separate opportunities for recreation. Considering the size and shape of the area to be served in many of these cases it is evident that the advantages of concentration must give way to the need for frequent centers, and that economy will here indicate the adoption of a normal size considerably less than that most desirable for cities of flatter topography.

In selecting the land for local parks in Pittsburgh

there are three chief points to consider: cheapness, suitability of the land for the purpose, and accessibility to the people who will use it.

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The best method of procedure is as follows: first, decide upon the general locality within which the park is needed and the functions which it is to serve; second, make a general examination of the values of property within the locality, consider roughly the cost of developing different kinds of land into the sort of park required, and select, tentatively, one or more sites which seem promising; third, obtain options on such of the land within the limits of the tentative site or sites as can be put under favorable option; then, fourth, ask publicly for the tender of any lands in the locality for parks, and hold public hearings thereon; finally, in the light of the information thus secured, select definitely the site and boundaries of the park and take the lands by condemnation proceedings. It is far better to proceed in this way than to begin by buying or accepting certain pieces of land, no matter how favorable the terms may be, and subsequently acquiring adjacent pieces to rectify the boundaries or

complete the requisite area. The very establishment of a park renders the adjacent land more valuable at once, and therefore, if the City buys park land piecemeal it has to pay in the latter purchases an increased price due solely to its having previously started to establish a park in the neighborhood. The condemnation process, preceded by obtaining options where possible, takes all the land at one and the same instant, and the cost is that of land in a parkless district.

Delay is apt to add but little to the cost of acquiring parks in built-up regions where land and building values are reasonably stable, whereas it adds enormously to the cost in regions at the growing margin of the city. Here, where the greater city of the future is being made, is surely the opportunity to save the large cost of supplying a built-up district with neighborhood parks.



*Westinghouse Pond, Schenley Park*

*Photo courtesy of Melissa McMasters*