



**First Report of
The Park and Outdoor Art Association
Louisville, Kentucky 1897**

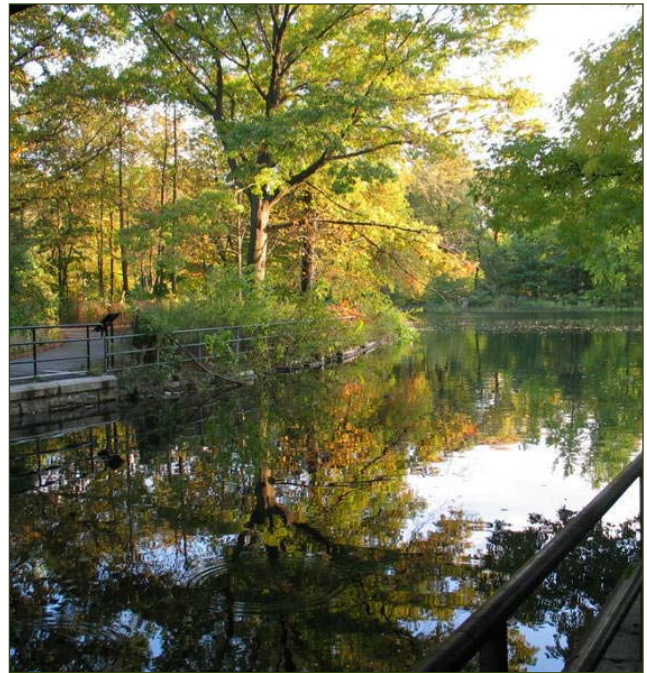
The True Purpose of A Large Public Park

by John C. Olmsted, Landscape Architect

In his park reports for individual cities, including his 1903 report for Portland, Oregon, John Charles Olmsted produced powerful statements on the value of public parks in general. He delivered the address excerpted here in 1897, at the first meeting of the American Park and Outdoor Art Association. This unique organization brought together a diverse group of park advocates, village improvement societies, landscape architects, women's clubs, and many others all dedicated to the "conservation of natural scenery, the acquirement and improvement of land for public parks and reservations, and the advancement of all outdoor art having to do with the designing and fitting of grounds for public and private use and enjoyment." They convened in Louisville, where John Charles and his more famous stepfather and partner, Frederick Law Olmsted, had been developing an outstanding municipal park system for more than a decade. In this keynote speech to what was a historic and unprecedented assembly of park advocates and landscape architects, John Charles took the opportunity to make a thorough statement of some of the essential values of the practice he had helped to found.

—*Ethan Carr, Reprints editor*

The true purpose of a large public park is to provide for the dwellers in cities convenient opportunity to enjoy beautiful natural scenery and to obtain occasional relief from the nervous strain due to the excessive artificiality of city life.



Prospect Park. Image courtesy of Wapedia.

By large public park is not meant one covering more than a certain number of acres, but one large enough to contain a complete natural landscape, where the boundaries will not be obtrusive, where city conditions will not be unduly apparent, where one may stroll over hill and dale, across meadows and through woods, always amid natural surroundings for hours without twice following the same routes; where one may come again and again without becoming familiar with all its interesting localities and natural features; where many thousands of visitors



Fishing contest. Prospect Park Archive. Image courtesy of the Prospect Park Alliance, Brooklyn, NY.



Image courtesy of the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, Louisville, KY.



Participants in the Art of Landscape program at Franklin Park, Boston, MA. Photo by Matt Teuten. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Olmsted NHS, Brookline, MA.

may be enjoying the scenery at the same time without crowding each other; where those who especially seek seclusion may find parts so remote from the boundaries that even if city houses are not completely hidden they are reduced in the distant perspective to inconspicuous proportions as compared with the foliage of trees and other natural objects in the foreground; so remote that the roar of street traffic is less noticeable than the rustle of foliage stirred by the breeze or than the songs of birds or sounds of insects.

That the scenery of a park should be beautiful no one would deny, but that it should be natural needs explanation. There can hardly be such a thing as absolutely natural scenery in a public park near a large city. Fires, pasturing, cultivation, wood-chopping, the destruction or driving away of the wild animals, wild birds and insects, and the introduction of others, have long since ended purely natural conditions about every large city, leaving at best only a general resemblance to natural scenery. Even if a tract of land is still to be found in a comparatively natural condition while in private ownership, it would not remain entirely in that condition after being properly fitted for and used as a public park.

With these limitations in mind, what is meant by the natural scenery of a large public park may be described as ordinarily either open meadow, open grassy hillsides or rolling ground, open groves of trees, with good turf, dense woods, borders of shrubbery, or low woody or herbaceous undergrowth, water in river, brook, pond or pool and, more rarely, cliffs or ledges of rock. These principal features of the scenery again may be divided into their elements of earth or rock surface, water surface and foliage, either ground cover, shrubbery, or trees.

The general earth or rock surface of a tract of land taken for a park, except where it has been broken by agriculture or for some other utilitarian purpose, and except where it is necessary to disturb it in connection with making more varied scenery or to fit it for the use of the public, seldom needs much grading. In some few cases, as at

Back Bay Fens and Marine Park, Boston, every square yard of the original surface has to be altered in order to create a kind of scenery better adapted to public use and enjoyment than the original scenery. In other cases, as at Central Park, New York, and Jackson Park, Chicago, a large portion of the whole area has to be regraded for the same reason.

In most cases a good deal of grading needs to be done in places. The original natural surface is wholly or partially destroyed and a new surface is created artificially; but it should be so shaped and finished as to appear natural or at least as closely in harmony with natural surfaces as study and care can make it. Too often, however, through lack of appreciation of the true purpose of a large public park, the grading, which must be done, either ignorantly or carelessly or owing to mistaken ideas as to economy, or owing to personal preference for artificiality, is made as regular and unnatural as possible, so that what might have been done in harmony with the natural scenery antagonizes it and greatly lessens its value for its true purpose.

Abundant instances of artificial looking grading in the wrong place exist in many of our large public parks. The responsibility of park commissioners for this sort of interference with the true purpose of a large public park is generally only in the indirect way of entrusting the work to men not properly trained in park making or by enforcing an unwise economy; for it must be acknowledged that to grade naturally and gracefully usually costs more than to grade formally and stiffly.

The water surfaces of a park need more study and care to make them appear natural in outline and as to their margins than do the ground surfaces of the park. Too often park waters are almost as stiff and formal in their outlines and in the shaping of their shores as are the curvilinear distributing reservoirs of water works. Here again the park commissioners are indirectly responsible for the bad results in consequence of working without the plans and directions of a trained artist or without a foreman trained in producing natural effects in park grading.

The verdure of a large public park is what the eye rests upon almost everywhere and it is therefore the most important of the natural elements of the scenery. The almost universal ground-cover is grass, since no other plant is so well adapted to the purpose of hiding bare earth while enduring, with due care and under sufficient restrictions, the tramping of great numbers of people. But there are cases where even grass will not thrive or where a wilder or more varied effect is desirable. Such cases are very generally ignored in our large public parks, owing to a lack of knowledge or lack of artistic appreciation of the possibilities or requirements of particular cases.

If gardeners studied natural scenery more they would almost surely discover many opportunities in parks for the application of what they could observe in the country. For instance, a dense natural wood, which need not be or can not well be thinned out sufficiently to permit a good turf to be grown, so that people may properly be allowed to ramble everywhere in it, may often be rendered far more natural and interesting by planting pretty wild flowers in its margins and suitable shrubby undergrowth in its interior than by attempting to grow grass on it. Again, steep, open banks, where it is difficult and expensive and often unnatural to maintain turf, can be made far more interesting by the use of low ground-covering plants or shrubbery.

It is usual in most public parks, even in the portions that are intended to most closely resemble natural scenery, to plant many trees and shrubs that are not only not indigenous to the locality or neighboring regions, but wholly foreign; and not only this, but purely horticultural varieties of trees and shrubs, often with most markedly unnatural forms, foliage or bloom, are used, not to aid in producing a beautiful piece of natural scenery, but solely because of their individual interest or eccentricities or for their strikingly artificial effect in masses.

The intention in using foreign trees and shrubs, when native sorts would actually be more appropriate and harmonious with the landscape, is generally to secure greater

variety and therefore greater interest in detail. This is a worthy motive and may be indulged in if it does not result in sacrificing the true purpose of the park. But the use of foreign or horticultural varieties of trees and shrubs often results in artificializing to a most deplorable extent what certainly ought to be a neatly natural landscape.

In this department of park management almost every one concerned has been to blame, but the park commissioners less than their employees, because they less often personally direct the choice of trees and shrubs than they do other elements of the park landscape.

Relief from the nervous strain of an artificial city life is afforded in no way so agreeably and conveniently as by

a ramble amid the natural scenery of a large park and by the leisurely contemplation of the landscape. There are many workers in a city who suffer more or less from nervous strain, though often they are not fully aware of it. Where a large public park, with ample provisions of natural scenery, has been created, it has never failed to be much frequented for this purpose and to afford untold benefit to those who use it. Not only are the quiet and seclusion obtainable in the middle of a large park necessary in affording opportunities for occasional relief from the nervous strain of our artificial city life, but they are necessary to the enjoyment of the landscape of the park. Therefore not only should conspicuous artificial objects unnecessary for the convenient use of the park be excluded from its natural parts, but noisy and dangerous



The Mall in Central Park. Image by Sara Cedar Miller. Courtesy of the Central Park Conservancy, New York, NY.

occupations and amusements should also be kept out of, at least, the middle portions of a large park.

When one is seated under a tree, quietly contemplating a beautiful landscape, one should not be in danger of being hit by a base ball or golf ball, or be subjected to the annoyance of boys engaged in some game, yelling close at hand. In order to have the essential quality of seclusion, a large public park should not be attempted on both sides of a railroad or important city street, if it is possible to avoid it; for even if the landscape could be made to seem continuous across the gap, the noise would almost destroy the desired seclusion of a considerable part of the park.

An extent of natural scenery sufficient to afford the sense of quiet and seclusion, so beneficial to the city worker, can only be secured in a large park. Hence this should be the essential characteristic of a large park. It is the one vital reason for the existence of a large park. No number of small parks can possibly answer the same purpose, however useful and even necessary they may be for other reasons.

We are, unfortunately, too much inclined to spend a holiday in seeking some more or less exciting pleasure. A quiet drive or stroll in a large park, or in the country, with perhaps a family picnic under the trees, would be far more restful and therefore more rational than to rush off by train to some Coney Island pleasure resort, with its various artificial attractions.

Even if the true purpose of a large public park has been kept in view during the process of selecting the land, determining upon the landscape features, and designing its necessary constructions and plantations, it seems to be very generally lost sight of subsequently, and a marked tendency shows itself to artificialize the landscapes of our large public parks.

It is no doubt true that the majority of the visitors to a large public park on a holiday seek some positive amuse-



Bank Rock Bay, Ramble, Central Park. Photo Sara Cedar Miller. Courtesy of the Central Park Conservancy.



Sheep Meadow, Central Park. Photo Sara Cedar Miller. Courtesy of the Central Park Conservancy.



Central Park. Photo Sara Cedar Miller. Courtesy of the Central Park Conservancy.

ment and prefer artificial attractions, and that they tend rather to avoid than to seek the secluded natural parts of the park. This can not be justly used as an argument in favor of artificializing the natural scenery of a large public park. This scenery has been preserved or created for an entirely different purpose, and one with which artificial means of amusement, are utterly at variance. It can not be rightly urged that it is unfair to the majority to use public funds for the benefit of a minority. That argument would apply to every square and almost everything the city possesses equally well. It is not an unreasonably small minority who use and appreciate and especially who benefit by, even if they do not fully appreciate, the more secluded and natural parts of a large public park. Besides, a great many others do not know what is good for them when they go to a park to look for more exciting pleasures. They should be gradually and unconsciously educated to better uses of large public parks and not have their crude demands alone catered to.

Park commissioners should not only understand the true purpose of a large public park, but they should have the courage of their convictions. They should know when to say “No,” in answer to demands for introducing artificial objects and amusements into the natural scenery of the large public parks. This is where park commissioners are sometimes not true to their trust. Instead of preserving a large park in the simple, natural beauty, as a priceless heritage for future generations, they yield little by little to the temporarily urgent demands of those who raise a clamor for a site for something which, however desirable in itself, is as much out of place in the natural scenery of a large public park as a manual training school would be amid the books of a public library or a baseball cage would be in an art gallery.

If it is thought wise for a municipality to provide such artificial attractions, they should be limited in kind and number and be carefully devised. It would not be wise or economical for a city to destroy or injure the beautiful natural scenery of a large public park by introducing

artificial attractions into it, when such attractions could perfectly well be provided in the smaller parks or in special amusement grounds, which could usually be much nearer the center of population than a large park, and therefore, could be used by more people, more frequently, and more cheaply.

It is customary for cities to provide for certain kinds of amusements, which are healthful and innocent, and for certain artificial objects, that are instructive and entertaining, and for some that are artistic and inspiring, and which can not be, or are not usually, supplied solely by private effort. Such for instance are formal gardens, statuary, conservatories, botanical and zoological gardens, concert groves, electric and other fountains, fireworks and the like; also popular athletic grounds, parade grounds, ball grounds for boys and facilities for boating and bathing.

From motives of expediency it is sometimes necessary to include arrangements for some of these purposes in large public parks, but they should be placed in the borders of the park and in such a way that they will do the least possible damage to the more secluded parts of the natural scenery of the park. Great discrimination is necessary in selecting among such objects those which will least interfere with the primary purpose of a large public park. Those forms of amusement or instructive entertainment requiring large buildings or implying much noise or which draw large and careless crowds, which would be liable to injure the grass and shrubbery and trees of the park, should be excluded.

It is good policy to secure suitable lands adjoining a large public park which can be held in reserve, as sites for public museums, grounds for parades, fireworks, public speaking, baseball and by flooding in winter—for skating, grounds for zoological collections, for a public conservatory, and so on. The park in Brooklyn is exceedingly fortunate in having two very commodious public grounds adjoining it. It is greatly to be desired that other cities should do likewise. ■