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REPRINTS

In 1906, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., had been a full partner with his older half-brother, John Charles Olmsted, in the firm of Olmsted Brothers for eight years. Still only thirty-six, he had already organized the first academic program in landscape architecture at Harvard in 1900 and co-authored the McMillan Plan for Washington, DC, in 1902. In his role at the family firm, he had replaced Charles Eliot (who died in 1898) as the landscape architect for Boston's Metropolitan Park Commission, and he was the principal for many other park and city planning projects all over the country as the office grew in size and influence.

One of Olmsted's important colleagues in this phase of his career was John Nolen, who began studying landscape architecture at Harvard in 1903. He was one year older than Olmsted and brought his own considerable previous experience in education, administration, and municipal reform to his new career in what would soon be known as city planning. Nolen opened his own office in Cambridge in 1904 and went on to become one of the busiest professionals of his generation, specializing in the new and growing field that he and Olmsted, among others, were so influential in defining. In this article, Olmsted and Nolen indicate how landscape architects at the beginning of the twentieth century used their experience in the design of park and parkway systems in dozens of American cities in developing the framework and methods for more comprehensive city plans.

—Ethan Carr, Reprints Editor

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The Normal Requirements of American Towns and Cities in Respect to Public Open Spaces

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and John Nolen, originally printed in *Charities and the Commons: A Weekly Journal of Philanthropy and Social Advance,* Volume 19, 1906

At the present time, public spirited people in this country appreciate the value of open spaces in towns and cities. They realize that such areas are not only desirable but increasingly necessary in order that opportunity for exercise and for the enjoyment of outdoor beauty may be more generally provided. In a vague way they approve of large increase in the number of playgrounds and parks. But few even in the more enlightened communities seem yet to understand that these open spaces are of great variety, that they are or should be selected and designed to serve radically different purposes and that the failure to understand this principle and to keep it constantly in mind leads to gross waste and inefficiency in our public grounds.

In few other phases of private or public life is there so generally a lack of clear thinking. This is an important matter for American municipalities to consider, for failure to select sites discriminatingly, to design them for specific purposes and to confine their use to those purposes, is to waste the public funds and to lose to a considerable degree the benefits that might otherwise accrue to the people.

It is, of course, true in this as in most other matters that there is some overlapping. The purposes are not absolutely

distinct and most public grounds are serviceable in a number of different ways. But it is equally true that the greatest efficiency here as elsewhere depends upon clear and intelligent differentiation, upon a recognition that the ends to be served are different and that therefore different means must usually be employed to meet them.

This article aims only to outline in a general way the more important types, of public grounds. For the sake of convenience and clearness they will be considered under six headings:

(1) Streets, boulevards and parkways;
(2) City squares, commons and public gardens;
(3) Playgrounds
    a) For little children;
    b) For children of the school age;
    c) For older boys and men and for girls and women;
(4) Small or neighborhood parks;
(5) Large parks;
(6) Great outlying reservations.

These six divisions may be said to represent the normal requirements of large cities. For somewhat smaller places, the outlying reservations and in some cases even the large parks might not be necessary. In such matters there can be no absolute rule. No system of public grounds could possibly be devised that would fit any and every community, for no two communities are alike. They represent infinite variations arising from differing physical, historical and social conditions. Success in any particular case will depend, therefore, not only upon recognition of the different types of public grounds but also upon an accurate and sympathetic estimate of the peculiar local conditions and local needs.

I. Streets Boulevards and Parkways

All communities, no matter what their size may be, need to regard the plan, character and appearance of their streets. To do this intelligently, they must consider the primary purpose that streets in various parts of the town or city are to serve. For example, streets in the business sections would not normally be the same in width or treatment as in residential sections. Again, thoroughfares making through connections from one part of the city to another or even to outlying towns, would be different in many essential ways from streets that are intended for merely local use. This division of the subject, therefore, is fundamental and of practically universal concern. And proper consideration of it should affect the city plan.

Boulevards and parkways are agreeable promenades in themselves and serve usually as pleasant means of access

Parkway, Buffalo, NY; courtesy Olmsted National Historic Site, NPS.

Riverway, Boston, MA, described in the original text as "a typical valley parkway maintaining a natural surface water channel;" courtesy Olmsted National Historic Site, NPS.

Bandstand and Lake, Delaware Park, Buffalo; courtesy Olmsted National Historic Site, NPS.

to parks from other parts of the city or from one park to another. Boulevards are usually arranged formally with rows of shade trees and parallel pathways for those on foot and on wheels. The simplest type has a broad drive in the center with a walkway on either side, separated from the drive by a belt of turf and always shaded by trees. Frequently two driveways are provided with a broad space between containing trees and turf and sometimes foot paths, bicycle paths, bridle paths or other conveniences; and often shrubs, flowers, statues and other decorations. In recent years some boulevards have been made to provide for electric car tracks upon a special turfed reservation with rows of trees, where the cars can attain high speed with little danger of collision with other vehicles. Such reservations are generally between two roadways, but in some suburban districts, a double track is placed on either side of a single roadway between the curb and sidewalk.

A parkway, so far as it can be discriminated from a boulevard, includes more breadth of turf or planted ground and also usually narrow passages of natural scenery of varying widths, giving it a somewhat park-like character and inducing a less formal treatment of the roads, paths and accessory features. Parkways are frequently laid out along streams so as to include the natural beauty of brook or river scenery and to preserve the main surface water channels in public control, thus providing for the adequate and economical regulation of storm drainage and floods.

II. City Squares, Commons and Public Gardens

These are the most usual type of public recreation grounds and often the most open to the charge of ill-considered selection and design. An opinion prevails very generally, that a city cannot have too many "squares" or "breathing places" and if they are not built upon and are green with

Highland Park, Rochester, NY; courtesy Eliza Davidson.

grass and trees they justify themselves. In a measure this is true and yet by taking thought these same areas may be made many times more serviceable. They are usually of small size and are found in the business as well as the residential sections of a city. The principal functions are to furnish agreeable views for those passing by them or through them in the course of their daily business and to provide a pleasant resting place or promenade for the much smaller number to take the time to use them in this manner. On account of the almost constant passing through such squares, the best arrangement is to provide for reasonably direct and convenient paths along the lines most used. Where this is not done, many of those who use the square are likely to be so irritated by the indirectness as to miss much of the pleasure they might otherwise have received if it had been correctly placed. A formal plan of walks, either on straight lines or curved, is generally adopted for such squares and is well suited to the conditions and to the decorative treatment of the area, providing much more effectively than irregular plans for the numerous statues, fountains, and gay flower beds which have their most appropriate location in such places. Shade trees, either as a complete grove or in rows along the paths or grouped in some more complex plan, are almost essential features of such squares. A modification of this type of square is sometimes met with where the space, instead of being used for a short cut and for enjoyment from within, is designed primarily to present an agreeable picture to those passing upon the adjacent streets. When the area is very small and the passing is almost wholly along one side, this treatment is most effective, because where the only aim is a pictorial effect from a limited point of view better results can be obtained than when appearance must be reconciled with other uses of the land. Nevertheless, there are few cases in which a small square will not have a greater recreative value to the public if its pictorial aspect is somewhat sacrificed to such uses as resting and promenading.

III. Playgrounds

To no other form of public recreation grounds is so much attention now being directed as to playgrounds. An illustration of this fact is to be noted in the recent organization in Washington of the Playground Association of America. It has now come to be recognized that convenient provision for exercise in the open air is indispensable if we are to preserve health of body and mind. Indeed, it is a matter of vital importance, calling more and more loudly for systematic municipal action as cities increase in size and density of population, as more and more people come to be engaged in confining occupations. Furthermore, the quick and cheap transportation constantly reduces the amount of exercise which people take as an incident to their daily work. In a general way, the imperative need for playgrounds is coming to be recognized especially as regards to children whose development into healthy and useful members of the community depends quite as much upon physical as upon mental exercise.

These playgrounds are of three classes. The first to be considered is for the smallest children. Whether in con-

The men's gymnastics grounds in Charlesbank, Boston, MA; courtesy Olmsted National Historic Site, NPS.

The sand courts in Charlesbank, Boston, MA; courtesy Olmsted National Historic Site, NPS.

nection with school grounds or elsewhere, there should be in each neighborhood, a space not open to the hurly burly of the larger children, where mothers may take little tots, mostly under the school age to get quiet, out-of-door pleasure and exercise. A plain lawn, if well cared for, will stand their usage and is of the greatest value for them to play upon. But for these youngsters even more than the older children it is needful to offer something to play with and nothing is more useful than a pile of clean sea sand. Its value is increased if water is near at hand to wade and dabble in. A small shallow basin in which they can play gives children an amount of healthful pleasure that is cheaply bought at the price of setting apart such limited areas for their exclusive use.

But, perhaps the most important playgrounds are for children of the school age and these can best be arranged and used in connection with the schools. Of course many schools have playgrounds but these are seldom large enough, for as school buildings have grown in size to meet the increasing demand, playgrounds have generally been encroached upon instead of being correspondingly enlarged. If it is agreed that it is almost as important for the city to provide adequate playground accommodations as it is to provide school rooms, there is a need to greatly increase the present playground areas. A few large playgrounds in remote places where land is cheap will not answer the purpose, which is to give opportunity for exercise and active play near the children's homes and preferably next to the school, so that it can be used during the recesses as well as after hours. Bare earth or some kind of pavement is the only surface that will stand the concentrated and constant use to which such a playground should be put, but that is no reason for making it an absolute Sahara of desolation. Trees will grow in such an area if adequate pains are taken to supply them with a quantity of good soil under the hard surface and to give their roots artificially the water which that surface cuts off. Vines on the building and a hedge or narrow border of attractive flowering shrubs, reducing the playing areas by a very small percentage would often make the place more attractive to the children and give them some of the recreative value of beauty, which is cheaply purchased even at the cost of a few square feet of additional land. Moreover it can often be secured by the ingenious use of corners and strips that would be otherwise wasted. In this way the playground may be made an attractive and serviceable place to others besides the children and might be used by the elders in certain hours when not needed by the children. The devotion of much detailed ingenuity to getting the best possible use out of the city's investment in playground land is a corollary to the importance of providing adequate playgrounds.

The third class of playgrounds is for the older boys and young men, and for girls and women. As the city grows there is a constantly decreasing inducement or even opportunity for taking in the form of play the exercise which many of them fail to get in their daily work. For them what is needed are out door gymnasia and places for athletic sports. Unfortunately, many of these sports require considerable area in proportion to the numbers engaged in them and for these the grounds must generally be at a greater distance from the people's homes than is reasonable for the other playgrounds.

Moreover, some of these needs are cared for by private enterprise through clubs and associations, and so far as this can be done it becomes unnecessary for the city to burden itself with the duty; but there are and always will be many who lack the means or the organizing power to secure such grounds for themselves, and the city can better afford to act as their agent and supply them with attractive grounds than to have them use their surplus energy in ways less useful to themselves and to the community. Grounds of this class should include ball fields, running tracks, places for jumping, vaulting, throwing the hammer and quoits, bowling and the like, and convenient accommodations for bathing and dressing. The grounds should be ample, accessible, thoroughly complete in their arrangement and well maintained.

Here, then, we have three kinds of exercise so distinct as to call for several kinds of grounds differing radically in size, distribution and arrangement although the apparently specific name of "playground" might be properly applied to each. The illustrations of the "Charlesbank," the first playground constructed in this country, and several of those in Chicago, will help to make clear the general character and usefulness of these grounds.

IV. Small or Neighborhood Parks

Under this heading may be included grounds of from 10 to 100 even 200 aces in area. Except in extent such parks are not essentially different in the purpose they

Courtesy Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy.

Courtesy Prospect Park Alliance.

Courtesy Forest Park Forever.

serve and the character of their design from city squares and gardens. But this difference in extent affords an opportunity for a degree of breadth and freedom that is unobtainable in the smaller grounds. On the other hand the seclusion from the city and the broad and beautiful natural scenery that characterize the larger "rural" parks can not here be had. Yet small passages interesting and agreeable scenery are often possible. This scenery can seldom be natural in appearance but it can often be quite beautiful, a certain elaboration, elegance and even magnificence taking the place of the more quiet and restful simplicity of the large park in a way that appeals very obviously to many people. And there is, therefore, more or less tendency to develop large parks in the same direction. It is unfortunate that it should be so, for these ends can be attained almost as well upon small parks as upon large, and therefore it is clearly a mistake to treat large park in this style. It is because more cities have small parks of this elaborate and what might be called gardenesque character than have large and simple rural parks that many people have a perverted conception of what constitutes a park. These small parks are frequently used for the display of interesting and showy flowering shrubs and trees and make a feature of fountains, statues and other sculpture. In moderation such objects, together with terraces and other architectural work, are entirely appropriate and desirable in parks of this class and add much to the effect of elegance and richness, for the enjoyment is closely related to that offered by architecture and decorative design and other pleasures forming a part of daily city life.

V. Large Parks

The large park or the rural or country park as it is now generally designated, comprises in most cases from two hundred to a thousand acres or more and is the chief feature of a city park system. It is seldom undertaken except by large cities or cities so rapidly growing that the need of such provision can be clearly foreseen. Its main object is to provide conveniently for that sort of recreation which is to be obtained by strolling or driving in a pleasant country district. There is no doubt that the enjoyment of beautiful natural scenery is to the majority of city dwellers one of the most refreshing antidotes for the wearing influences of city life. Where cities are of moderate size and are surrounded by a beautiful country district this enjoyment is readily accessible to the mass of the population and it has fortunately become more so in proportion to the size of cities within the last twenty-five years through the development of electric car lines and the use of the bicycle and automobile; but this increased accessibility of the country has been in part offset by the growth of the cities during the same period and by the serious impairment of rural quiet in the suburban regions through the same cause, namely, improved cheap transportation. It is necessary therefore, if the people of large cities are to have easy access to refreshing rural scenery that the municipality should withdraw from its taxable area a tract sufficiently large to provide scenery within its own limits. The cost, both directly in money and indirectly through interference with the street system and with the normal commercial development of the land, is necessarily very great, and only the purpose of providing beautiful scenery, of a kind thoroughly contrasting with city life and measurably sequestered from all its sights and sounds, can justify this heavy cost because almost all the other purposes served in public recreation grounds can be met more economically and far more conveniently in smaller areas distributed throughout the city. Therefore, the essential characteristic of a well-designed and well managed park of this class is that all of the other numerous objects which it may serve are subordinated absolutely to the provision of scenery of a natural, placid and beautiful character.

Of course, it is not enough merely to possess large areas of rural scenery, however perfect; they must be made available to large numbers of people, and it is the problem of making them available without destroying their most

valuable quality that presents the greatest practical difficulty to the landscape architect. To turn the public loose upon them without restrictions and without the artificial appearance given by broad paths and roads, might be at the beginning delightful; but the marks of man's interference would soon be set upon the landscape far more universally and conspicuously by wear and tear than even by a number of constructed roads. and at the same time the inconvenience in getting about would interfere with the comfort of the visitor and his enjoyment of much of the landscape. Therefore, roads, paths, steps, bridges, seats, shelters, buildings and other constructions must nearly always be introduced. These can seldom be made to look like anything except the works of man and the disingenuous attempts occasionally made to palm some of them off as freaks of nature, in the way of curiously arranged ledges, grottoes, and what not, almost invariably seem so childish and affected as to be more obtrusive than a frank recognition of their man-made character. But on the other hand, these things, while treated frankly and simply as human constructions, may be made either relatively inconspicuous and subordinate elements of the landscape or may be elaborated into strikingly conspicuous features. In rural parks such conspicuousness is too heavy a price to pay even for great individual beauty in the features to which it may call attention because it is essentially contradictory to the purpose of the parks. Architectural display is here to be deliberately eschewed. Of course beauty should be sought for in every element and detail of park construction, but in the rural park, it should be of the shy and modest sort which appears to be done not for its own sake, but solely for its contribution to the general effect. It should in no way invite public attention and admiration to itself.

Prospect Park, Brooklyn, containing five hundred and twenty six acres, and Franklin Park, Boston, with about the same area, are useful illustrations of what large city

1871 Olmsted Vaux Plan for Prospect Park; courtesy Olmsted National Historic Site, NPS.

parks may be. In neither, it is true, have the intentions of the designer been fully realized and yet the main idea, (the provision of beautiful, quiet scenery of the type that is called natural) has not been departed from. Therefore, the "Long Meadow" of Prospect Park and the "Country Park" of Franklin Park can be studied with profit.

VI. Great Outlying Reservations

As yet this class of reservations has not come at all generally into the possession of American municipalities. It consists of forests, beaches, meadows, mountains, lakes, and rivers, those natural features of universal interest and beauty that in one form or another surround so many of our cities. Such features are of necessity great in extent, but as they are almost always located at a considerable distance from the centers of population and are often ill-adapted to the requirements of trade and house building, they are not excessively costly. These reservations differ from "rural parks" in three particulars. They are usually located at a much greater distance from the centers of population; they are of larger area; and as they are less used, they require less in the way of artificial constructions. Their chief value is in the protection they afford for future generations; therefore, their preservation and possession by the public is of immense importance. The most notable of such reservations in the United States are those in the possession of the Boston Metropolitan District, which includes four forest reservations with a total area of over ten thousand acres, and also twenty-three miles of connecting parkway, seven or eight miles of seashore and thirty miles of river bank. But little more than a decade ago, this system was non-existent and the invaluable reservations that comprise it today were the possession of private individuals, to do with as they would. The success of this system is an instructive and inspiring example of what can be achieved by enlightened, persistent and well-directed efforts.

The conclusion that this paper aims to reach is that large towns and cities need not only to increase the number of their public grounds but more especially, they need to increase their variety of open spaces. A complex system is called for. More than an increase in expenditure, there must be a widening of aims, a finer discrimination of the public's needs, an expansion of the ideas of service and a more accurate estimate of local conditions and local needs. The size, character and location of sites for each particular purpose must be more carefully considered, as well as the nature of the design and its faithful maintenance. Now is the time to turn active attention to these matters for it is now that so many communities are moving to increase the number of their exercise and pleasure grounds. Energetic doing should be guided by clearer thinking. ■

Revere Beach, Revere, MA; courtesy Olmsted National Historic Site, NPS.

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