FREDERICK LAW
OLMSTED’S FIRST
AND LAST SUBURBS:
Riverside and Druid Hills
by Darlene R. Roth
FOREWORD

by Dana F. White, Professor of Urban Studies and Director of the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts at Emory University and co-editor of Olmsted South: Old South Critic/New South Planner (1979)

The 1890s were, to resort to that convenient catch-all concept, a decade “in transition.” Nationally, the economy boomeranged between prosperity and panic. Regionally, a rural South struggled to free itself from the perceived colonial bondage imposed upon it by an industrial North. Locally, the city of Atlanta surged beyond its historic borders in its first drive toward suburbanization. Along the city’s eastern edge, Druid Hills, a new suburban development, encapsulated all of these transitional forces.

A planned suburb, Druid Hills was typical of late nineteenth century settlement patterns: with urban cores increasingly filled to overflowing, their suburban rings rippled ever outward. Neither a railroad nor streetcar suburb, strictly speaking, Druid Hills reflected new stages in urban transportation and city building.

The force behind the planned suburb was Joel Hurt: developer, civil engineer, speculator, and transit magnate. Hurt’s first foray into suburban development had been Inman Park, which was still under construction when he organized the Kirkwood Land Company to develop 1,500 acres between Atlanta and the city of Decatur. In 1890, Hurt engaged Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. to transform the undeveloped lands of the Kirkwood Properties into the verdant acres that became Druid Hills.

When Olmsted first visited Atlanta in 1890, he was approaching the pinnacle of his remarkable career. While he was reluctant to accept new commissions, the proximity of Atlanta to Asheville, North Carolina, where he was engaged in the design of Vanderbilt’s Biltmore estate, as well as the prospect of advancing his profession—and his business—in the South, persuaded him to undertake the project. By 1893, Olmsted had a plan ready for the Kirkwood holdings; however, it was not until 1903 that his client had the finances in place to close on the project. In 1905, two years after Olmsted senior’s death, the successor firm, the Olmsted Brothers, produced a fully-articulated version of their father’s master plan and, at Hurt’s urging, formally christened the new suburb Druid Hills.

The Druid Hills Corporation, under new ownership and management—with such noted Atlantans as Coca-Cola magnate Asa G. Candler, and realtors Forrest and Preston Adair in charge—held its first meeting in 1908, and conducted lot sales between 1908 and 1910. Immediately, the new suburb proved itself a success. Still, when compared to Riverside—Olmsted’s first suburb—Druid Hills has remained all—but forgotten.

The near-invisibility of Druid Hills in the Olmsted design canon has at least three causes. First is documentation. Since its inception in the late 1860s, Riverside has been assiduously and admirably documented. Consequently, it has become the ultimate measure of the Olmsted suburb. Until recently, by contrast, Druid Hills was little more than an antiquarian curiosity. Until its narrative was authenticated at the outset of the “Olmsted movement” during the 1970s, myth and history were interchangeable in its story. Second is context. Olmsted’s final major efforts—Biltmore, the Stanford campus, Boston’s “Emerald Necklace,” as well as the development of his firm and profession—have been so imposing as to subsume seemingly lesser efforts into near oblivion, even those of the magnitude of Druid Hills. Third is measure. Until the component parts of Olmsted’s two major suburbs—Riverside and Druid Hills—could be isolated and placed side-by-side for comparison, the Atlanta project lacked perspective.

The paper that follows examines and compares key design concepts embodied in the plans for Riverside and Druid Hills, and traces the evolution of Frederick Law Olmsted’s ideal from “suburban village” to “centreless suburb.” Druid Hills, Darlene Roth establishes, “represents a culmination in the suburban design of the mature Olmsted,” and emerges as “the prototype for early twentieth century suburbanization.” Olmsted’s design journey from Chicago to Atlanta spanned both decades and miles; throughout, that journey was marked by a continuity of vision.
According to the master list of projects of the Olmsted firm, Frederick Law Olmsted and his partners initiated fifteen suburban projects between 1890 and 1895.\(^1\) By contrast, in the 1860s Olmsted had executed plans for only three subdivisions, including, in 1868-69, Riverside, the first suburb to be designed by the firm. In the 1870s, as post-Civil War suburbanization gained momentum, the firm undertook nine suburban projects. In the 1880s, the firm initiated more than twice that number—twenty-three—of which thirteen were still on-going in the 1890s. Clearly, “suburbia” developed the Olmsted firm as much as the firm developed it.

Olmsted’s ideas about suburban developments were formulated early in his career. In basic outline they did not change with time; rather, Olmsted became more adept at bringing them to reality. In essence there were three components to his suburban ideal: the park or public space element, which was the central focus of the suburb, and served as the “drawing card” to make it more than an “ordinary” place. The second component was the parkway, conceived as both a connector and a pleasure drive, which linked the suburb with the nearby city, and provided a pleasurable experience for the commuter. The final component comprised the residential buildings, which took the form of “villas,” constructed on large lots. The siting of the suburban villa was enhanced by the street pattern, which was expressly designed to maximize landscape amenities, shield residents from through traffic, and adhere to the natural topography of the land.

During his career Olmsted mastered all three components in varying combinations. In the design for Riverside he achieved a successful relationship of public open spaces to the residential lots and street pattern. However, the parkway he proposed to connect Riverside with Chicago was never built. Olmsted’s approach to comprehensive planning was more fully expressed in his park system for Boston, where a circle of parks and parkways—the “Emerald Necklace”—link all parts of the city and provide a continuous green belt. Developed for urban Boston, the plan did not incorporate the residential villa. In Druid Hills, however, Olmsted had the opportunity to integrate all three components: the park, the parkway, and the ideal residential setting. The result is that Druid Hills represents the fullest realization of Olmsted’s ideal suburban development.
DRUID HILLS AND RIVERSIDE COMPARED

There are six areas in which the plans of Druid Hills and Riverside diverge: treatment of the railroad; street pattern; parks; parkway; architectural development; and autonomy/dependence of the suburb.

Treatment of the Railroad

When Olmsted was commissioned to design Riverside in 1868, certain elements of the town were already in place. Most importantly, the suburb-to-be was a railroad stop, with tracks running east-west across the 1,600-acre development. In the design for Riverside, Olmsted minimized the linearity of the railroad by softening its physical presence with trees and other landscape elements, and by orienting the street pattern away from the tracks. As evidenced in the preliminary report for the Riverside plan, Olmsted was not an advocate of the commuter railroad. “A railroad at the best,” he stated in the report, “affords a very inadequate and unsatisfactory means of communication between a rural habitation and a town.”

At Druid Hills, there was no railroad when Joel Hurt set out to develop the property in 1890. However, to his alarm two years later, the Georgia, Carolina, and Northern Railroad announced plans for a new commuter line, which was to run through the proposed suburb. Hurt fought a bitter legal battle to keep the railroad from building in Druid Hills, and called on Olmsted for support. In all likelihood it was Olmsted’s able testimony during the controversy which saved the suburb from the unwelcome intrusion of train tracks. As finally built, the railroad just skirted the easternmost edge of the proposed development.

The threat of the railroad removed, Olmsted could proceed with his original plan for Druid Hills, which featured an “electric road,” or trolley line. Soon after he had visited the 1,500-acre tract in 1890, Olmsted advised Hurt that it would be “essential to the success of the undertaking that an electric road, or other convenient, rapid, agreeable and popular means of communication...be provided between the city and some central point on the property.”

In recommending a trolley, Olmsted was advancing a transportation mode relatively new to Atlanta. He was also drawing on his client’s capabilities: in 1889, Hurt had built a trolley line to service his new development of Inman Park. While Hurt endorsed Olmsted’s plan for an electric trolley, he was less enthusiastic about the firm’s proposal to build the line adjacent to, rather than in the middle of, the projected parkway linking Druid Hills and Atlanta.
The Parkway

The term "park-way" was coined by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in the late 1860s. They defined it as a thoroughfare "designed with express reference to the pleasure with which [it] may be used for walking, riding, and the driving of carriages; for rest, recreation, refreshment, and social intercourse." The purpose of a parkway was to allow people "to pass from it to distant parts of town, as, for instance, when they want to go to a park, without the necessity of travelling for any considerable distance through streets no more convenient for the purpose than our streets of the better class are." Unfortunately, the parkway Olmsted proposed building between Riverside and Chicago was never built. At Druid Hills, however, Olmsted was able to see this important component of his suburban ideal come to fruition.

Olmsted first suggested a parkway to connect Druid Hills and Atlanta in 1890. In a letter to Hurt, he wrote:

Fig. 3: Trolley Lane along the Parkway, Druid Hills, c. 1941.

Atlanta Historical Society, Inc.
Fig. 4: Photograph taken by John Charles Olmsted, c. 1902, showing Ponce de Leon Avenue after grading.

By way of example, Olmsted referred to parkways already constructed in New York, Boston, Buffalo, and Chicago, which his firm had designed.

By 1892 plans for both a parkway and a streetcar line were under consideration for the new suburb. But upon receiving Olmsted's design for the parkway in 1893, Hurt fired off an indignant telegram: "Map of avenue received, thoroughly impracticable. Will break the company to build it." The chief point of contention was Olmsted's placement of the trolley line alongside the parkway, instead of in the middle of the street, as was customary. The extra trolley lane made the parkway's width unusually wide—and, as Hurt pointed out—hugely expensive to build. Olmsted stood firm. The advantages of the plan were three, he countered: the trolley could be built more inexpensively on turf than in the street; it would be better screened from the residential lots; and it could run at a higher rate of speed. A flurry of letters ensued in which the Olmsted firm continued to argue the finer points of its design. A personal visit from Olmsted to the site sealed the matter. The plan was accepted, and the parkway was surveyed, platted and staked. Construction of the broad thoroughfare—named Ponce de Leon Avenue—and the trolley line took place in the early 1900s.

The Street Pattern

There are few descriptions of the land in the correspondence concerning Druid Hills and no narrative project report has ever been found. But evidence suggests that the larger portion of the property was wooded; other areas had been farmed, and some was still under cultivation when Hurt and his associates purchased the tract. Reporting the sale of the property, The Atlanta Journal declared: "Nature itself has been lavish in gifts to this magnificent sweep of woods and shaded fields." Writing to his son John Charles in 1890, Olmsted merely described the
land as "wooded" and "hilly," and later as "rolling" ground with "little level land and no high hills."10

The design problem inherent in the street pattern for Druid Hills was quite different from that of Riverside. At Riverside, the primary topographic element was the Des Plaines River and the primary topographic hurdle the railroad. In Druid Hills Olmsted had a palette of intricate curves, hillocks, small streams, and unending variations of the land with which to work. Olmsted knew that to carve out straight streets at Druid Hills would be prohibitively expensive, as well as counter to his regard for the natural topography. Yet remarks made in the course of his plans for Chevy Chase, Maryland, at about the same time, indicate that his approach to streets was thoroughly rationalized, and not governed wholly by the visions of the picturesque. "To lay out streets...fitting the natural surface, but with the aim of making them both more eligible and more economical," he said, "was a task requiring much more original study and exercise of ingenuity than has ordinarily been applied to the laying out of streets."11 In "fitting the natural surface" at Druid Hills, Olmsted created a topographically sensitive plan for the streets, which by nature's intent gave curvilinearity to the design.

Fig. 5: The Plan for Riverside, Olmsted, Vaux & Co., 1869.
National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Massachusetts
A curvilinear street pattern was an Olmsted trademark, but the curvilinearity of Riverside and Druid Hills was substantially different. At Riverside, where the ground was flat, and nature would have facilitated a grid pattern, the streets curved back and forth on one another like the outlines of petals on a chrysanthemum. In Druid Hills, where the ground was hillier, the streets instead assumed linearity. They curved topographically, but they related to each other, and to the main streets, with a degree of rectangular regularity. This was particularly true of the north/south streets—Springdale, Oakdale, and Lullwater—and of Clifton Road, which served as a link between Ponce de Leon Avenue and the old (North) Decatur Road.

The Parks

Six parks fall alongside Ponce de Leon Avenue; additional “natural” areas and a golf course lend more park elements to the neighborhood. What is different about the Druid Hills parks from other Olmsted park systems is that both the parks and the parkway are an intrinsic part of the suburb, and are experienced simultaneously. By contrast, in earlier Olmsted suburbs, they are experienced sequentially: first the park, then the parkway, or vice versa. The parks in Druid Hills are designed as different kinds of environments, reflecting Olmsted’s interest in separating passive and active recreation areas. Significantly, they also relate to the residential lots, making them more than recreation areas, but also places to
view from the houses themselves. Indeed, from some perspectives, the parks appear to be extensions of the lawns and gardens.

As a system, the parks and parkway of Druid Hills reveals a sophisticated evolution in Olmsted’s ideas for traffic and circulation design in a residential area. Writing in 1868, Olmsted prophesied that existing street patterns would soon have “to be supplemented by a series of ways.”12 Such “ways” were to be made accessible to every dwelling house in a neighborhood, something which was exquisitely achieved in Druid Hills.

The nucleus of this idea was further explored by Olmsted in 1870. Here he argues for the advantages of small parks over large ones:

Numerous small grounds so distributed through a large town that some of them could be easily reached by a short walk from every house, would be more desirable than a single area of great extent, however rich in landscape attractions it might be. Especially would this be the case if the numerous local grounds were connected and supplemented by a series of trunk roads or boulevards...13

On a grand scale this is exactly what Olmsted accomplished in Boston, with the “Emerald Necklace.” The plan for Druid Hills reveals a similar park system on a much smaller scale, where walkways and lanes connect the houses to the parks and cut across the longer streets to make free pedestrian passage possible.

Fig. 7: View through Shadyside Park, Druid Hills, showing the character of Ponce de Leon Avenue, 1990.

William Thompson
Architecture

Olmsted, Sr., considered himself primarily a park designer, and his approach to suburbs was centered on the land; nonetheless, he encouraged good architecture in his developments. “Let your buildings be as picturesque as your artists can make them,” he urged in Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns. But Olmsted also recognized that the quality of architecture could not always be dictated. “We cannot judiciously attempt to control the form of the houses which men shall build,” he wrote to his clients in Riverside. “We can only, at most, take care that if they build very ugly and inappropriate houses, they shall not be allowed to force them disagreeably upon our attention when we desire to pass along the road upon which they stand.”

In the early years of his career, Olmsted left architecture primarily in the hands of his partner Calvert Vaux. After separating professionally from Vaux, Olmsted was even less involved in architectural design. In many of the suburbs which Olmsted designed, his role in the project was completed after the street plan was laid out and surveyed. Occasionally, Olmsted remained involved through the first phase of construction, but seldom did he have much say in the
architecture of his suburbs.

In the plan for Riverside, the architectural seeds were planted by Calvert Vaux, who designed a number of the original fifty residences, most in the Gothic Revival style. Only a few of these still stand. Riverside's development was halted soon after it got started, and the ensuing years saw development continue at an uneven pace. The result is a grand collection of architectural styles—including works by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, among others—without the architectural homogeneity of later suburbs.¹⁶

![Fig 9: A residence on Barry Point Road, Riverside, designed by Olmsted, Vaux & Co.](image)

Riverside in 1871 with a Description of Its Improvement. Riverside Improvement Co., originally published 1871.

Marion Pressley

Druid Hills, by contrast, had a different development pattern. It, too, was halted in its development, but even before any of the houses had been constructed. When building recommenced, development was relatively quick and more similar in its architectural expression. While Druid Hills could never be considered architecturally homogeneous, a greater section of it was developed at one time than Riverside, and there is a basic consistency among the buildings reflected in the period revivals of the 1920s and 1930s: Mediterranean Revival, Colonial Revival, Classical Revival, with Georgian Revival and English Vernacular Revival predominating.¹⁷ The result is visual variety which has a distinct sense of time and historic period attached to it.

A Question of Suburban Autonomy

It is apparent from Olmsted's early writings that he conceived of the suburb as a community, identifiable by its shape and location, related to an urban core and attached to it by some convenient transit means, but separate from that same urban core. The suburban community was also at least partially self-sufficient and autonomous.

In Olmsted's view, a suburb enjoyed rural scenery as well as urban advantages. Citing a suburban example, Olmsted wrote in 1870:

I have seen a settlement, the resident population of which was under three hundred, in which there was a public laundry, bath-house, barber's shop, billiard-room, beer-garden, and bakery. Fresh rolls and fresh milk were supplied to families before breakfast time every morning; fair fruit and succulent vegetables were delivered at house doors not half an hour after picking; and newspapers and magazines were distributed by a carrier.¹⁸

In Riverside Olmsted and Vaux had such a suburban "village," which is, in fact, what they called that subdivision. As a village, Riverside had a center: a railroad depot, hotel, small commercial block, a chapel, and a school constituted the communal core of the suburb. By 1871, when most of the improvements had been made to the land and the commercial core was complete, the Riverside
Improvement Company boasted that their “model suburban neighborhood combine[d] the conveniences peculiar to the finest modern cities, with the domestic advantages of the most charming country, in a degree never before realized.”

Druid Hills was planned without the central commercial and community core of Riverside. It is much more a “bedroom” community than a suburban village as represented by the Riverside model. At Druid Hills, Olmsted planned a hotel within the subdivision, but no commercial block, nor even a trolley depot. The parks, if anything, were the communal center. Olmsted could have designed Druid Hills entirely differently. When purchased by Joel Hurt, the property consisted of open and wooded land, bisected by a few unpaved country roads. The tract was located several miles from both Atlanta and Decatur and did not abut any other residential settlements. As such, the site and location of Druid Hills could have justified the development of a suburban village. Instead, Olmsted elected to design Druid Hills as a residential—or centreless—suburb.

According to Olmsted's chief biographer, Laura Wood Roper, when Olmsted was planning suburbs, there were two basic types of suburbs in America: those which were distinct and separate settlements, like Riverside, and those which constituted the outskirts of towns, and were extensions of a city's grid system. "Only rarely," states Roper, "was a suburb placed upon unoccupied land at a convenient distance from a city and designed specifically for a suburban residents." Olmsted's contribution was to conceive of the suburb in an entirely new way, as the plan for Druid Hills clearly demonstrates.

Given the significant difference between Riverside and Druid Hills, it might be argued that, over the years, Olmsted reformulated his definition of the "true" suburb. However, it seems more likely that Olmsted recognized the potential of new and growing trends in transportation and communication technologies and their use in creating a new type of residential form. In his preliminary analysis of the Druid Hills property, Olmsted made clear reference to the impact of technology on suburban development:

A further development...has of late appeared in the formation of large, comprehensively designed, permanent suburbs, homogeneously rural in the character of their scenery in which special art can be used to combine in the greatest degree practicable, the advantages of urban and country residences. The movement in this direction is being rapidly accelerated by various recent improvements in means of communication, such as electric street
cars, electric lighting, the telegraph and telephone. There is every reason to believe that it will be permanent and that suburbs of the character indicated will sooner or later be established in the vicinity of any considerable flourishing town. In making the transition from "suburban village," as exemplified by Riverside, to the "centreless suburb" of Druid Hills, Olmsted introduced a suburban form which would become ubiquitous across the American landscape in the twentieth century. Indeed, the centreless suburb is now so common a phenomenon that, to the uninformed observer, the significance of Druid Hills is unapparent. But seen against the backdrop of suburban development in the United States, Druid Hills emerges as the prototype for early twentieth century suburbanization, in the same way that Riverside is prototypical for nineteenth century suburbanization.

CONCLUSION

Druid Hills represents the best available example of what might be called the mature Olmsted. Olmsted's basic design principles have been identified by Charles E. Beveridge and others: they include the separation of transportation modes; the reservation of public spaces as an essential part of a suburban residence; the non-grid street pattern; respect for the local topography and flora; and specialized park experiences.

In the plan for the Druid Hills, Olmsted not only successfully applied his design principles, he expanded and refined them to produce an integrated design in which the parks, parkway, and residential settings are all interlaced. He also accepted—indeed, welcomed—new transportation and communication technologies, such as the trolley, which linked the suburbs to Atlanta. Enlarging on earlier ideas, Olmsted included turn-outs, separate entry roads for residents, and circular carriage drives at each house in Druid Hills, all of which transmuted very easily into automobile usage. Druid Hills looks like an early automobile suburb, which is not how Olmsted conceived of it, but it became one, as development of the suburb continued in the 1920s and 1930s. Most significantly, from its very inception, Druid Hills established a new suburban form—the residential suburb—and presaged suburban living as the predominant lifestyle of twentieth century America. Likewise, the future of the Olmsted firm in the twentieth century would lie more with the success of suburban development across the country than with the creation of large public parks.
FOOTNOTES


5. *IBID*.

6. FLO & Co. to Joel Hurt, December 5, 1890. OP/LC.

7. As sited in FLO & Co. to Joel Hurt, March 3, 1893. OP/LC.

8. A report may not have been prepared, since the design for the parkway system was considered "preliminary." Olmsted relied on both written and oral reports in dealing with his clients, a point made by Cynthia Zaitzevsky in the study of Olmsted's Boston projects. See *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Boston Park System* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1982), p. 139, and chapters on the design process. See also FLO to John Olmsted, February 17, 1893, from Chicago. OP/LC.


10. FLO & Co. to J. R. Cross, March 18, 1892. OP/LC.

11. FLO to Mr. Newlands, November 10, 1891. OP/LC.


14. *IBID*.


16. Riverside Historic District, Riverside Landscape Architectural District, National Historic Landmark nomination form, statements of description and significance.


21. FLO & Co. to Joel Hurt, December 5, 1890. OP/LC. Italics added.

22. Transcription of tape recorded lecture by Dr. Charles E. Beveridge at Emory University, February 3, 1983, pp. 13-15, 22-23, 25, 30-34.
SUGGESTED READINGS

Since John Reps began publishing his surveys of American city plans during the mid-1960s, Riverside has been featured prominently and consistently in studies of planning, design, and landscape architecture. Supplementary, more specialized accounts include: Herbert Bassman, Riverside—Then and Now (1936 & 1958); Riverside: A Village in a Park (1970); Edward Straka, The Riverside Landscape (1981); Edward Straka, Master Plan for the Revitalization of the Central Business District: Riverside, Illinois (1981); and The Years of Olmsted, Vaux & Co. 1865-1874 (1992).

With the celebration in 1972 of the 150th anniversary of FLO’s birth, scholarship on the history of Druid Hills had its beginnings, but Olmsted’s last suburb has yet to enter his design canon. The basic text remains Elizabeth A. Lyon’s “Frederick Law Olmsted and Joel Hurt: Planning for Atlanta,” in Dana F. White and Victor A. Kramer, eds., Olmsted South: Old South Critic/New South Planner (1979). In the Summer/Fall 1982 issue of the Atlanta Historical Journal, Dana F. White’s “Landscaped Atlanta: The Romantic Tradition in Cemetery, Park, and Suburban Development” and Andrew M. Ambrose’s “The Ties That Bind: Work and Family Patterns in the Oakdale Road Section of Druid Hills, 1910-1940” expand upon Lyon’s seminal study. Finally, the Atlanta Design Commission’s manual Druid Hills Historic District: Design Guidelines, Gail Morgan Timmis, ed. (n.d.), and the AIA Guide to the Architecture of Atlanta, Gerald W. Sams, ed. (1992) survey the built environment.
Founded in 1980, the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP) is a national network of volunteers and professionals, working to promote and protect the Olmsted legacy. NAOP is a non-profit membership organization.

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