

## THE PLACE AND THE MAKER

### *Frederick Law Olmsted and His Boston Parks*

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THE CONCEPTION OF THE GILDED AGE URBAN PARK SOUGHT TO RECLAIM SANITARY, RECREATIONAL, SCENIC, AND REFORMIST IDEALS PERCEIVED TO HAVE GONE ASTRAY UNDER INTENSE INDUSTRIALIZATION AND EXPANSION. IN BOSTON, EACH FACTOR TOOK ON CHARACTERISTICS PARTICULAR TO NEW ENGLAND. FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED'S BOSTON SYSTEM WAS A COMPOSITE OF HIS PREVIOUS WORK IN OTHER CITIES. THESE PARKS MANIFESTED THE UNIFICATION OF DESIGN PRINCIPLES THAT ADDRESSED THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF PARKS, AS WELL AS EXEMPLIFIED HIS NATURALISTIC STYLE, BOTH FULLY FORMED BY THE COMMENCEMENT OF HIS BOSTON WORK. THE CONFLUENCE OF THE CITY'S GILDED AGE POLITICAL ARENA, THE MAN'S VISION, AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF BOSTON ALLOWED FOR THE MANIPULATION OF PASTURELAND INTO THE MOST ELEGANT AND COMPLETE MANIFESTATION OF HIS DESIGN PHILOSOPHY.

## INTRODUCTION

*Consult the genius of the place in all;  
That tells the waters or to rise, or fall;  
Or helps th' ambitious hill the heav'ns to scale,  
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;  
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,  
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades,  
Now breaks, or now directs, th' intending lines;  
Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs.<sup>i</sup>*

—Alexander Pope

In 1886, the American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted delivered a paper to the Boston Parks Department regarding a significant expansion of the city's park system, much of which he designed in the previous decade. He suggested the purchase and development of 500 acres of farmland in West Roxbury into an expansive park, connecting to other projects on the city's western border. The commissioners and city government initially balked at the cost of such an undertaking, yet the deftness of Olmsted's design reflected a mature style seen in his other Boston spaces—a combination of the pragmatic and the visionary. "It is most desirable," he presented, "to make use of any local circumstance of the slightest dignity of character to supply a centre of interest for such grounds. Such a circumstance may be found, for instance, in a natural feature, as a notable rock, or in a historical feature . . . or simply in a point of vantage for a view, as a prospect down the harbor."<sup>ii</sup> Olmsted was well established as America's preeminent landscape architect at the time of his arrival in Boston a decade earlier. Even so, his work in Boston solidified his reputation. The "Emerald Necklace" of parks he would come to design for the metropolis was a system that masterfully united aspects of his work seen in previous urban projects, and yet it was entirely unique to the geographic and social concerns of Gilded Age Bostonians.

When ground broke at the Back Bay Fens in 1879, it was the first new greenspace construction seen in the city of Boston in two decades. The capital of Massachusetts was late in

coming to the planning and construction of parks compared to other American cities that, rapidly expanding in response to industrial growth and population shifts, commenced park development closer to the Civil War. The city lacked the luxury of open farmland that into which most American cities expanded. Instead, the Shawmut Peninsula on which Boston developed was effectively an island for the first half of the 19th century.

The city connected south and west to Roxbury, Dorchester, and Brookline via Boston Neck, a narrow peninsula upon which present-day Washington Street ran as a causeway. Landfill projects before the 1850s were limited to the core of the city; the filling of the Mill Pond and construction of the Bulfinch Triangle (near the present-day North Station), as well as expansion to the east along the docks of the Great Cove. The completion of neither of these projects allowed for significant expansion of open space; land was quickly purchased by speculators and developed for commercial purposes.

What limited greenspace Boston contained through the Civil War differed significantly in form and function from what was to take shape in the city's parks movement of the 1870s and beyond. The Boston Common, an urban feature open from the beginning of Boston's settlement by Puritan colonists, was primarily pastureland for residents' livestock and served as the site for large public events, including military drills and capital punishment. Small-scale landfill, presaging the major Back Bay project, expanded into the West Cove, the present site of the Boston Public Garden. The formal design imposed on the Public Garden along with its small size contrasted the space with concurrent trends of urban park design nationally. The completion of the Back Bay fill was the catalyst that coincided with the emerging political and social commitment to build a park system in accordance with national state of the art.

The land expansion Boston desperately needed came in the filling of the Back Bay of the Charles River. Planning began as early as 1814 but the shallow tidal flats began receiving

fill in 1857. While laborers emptied train cars of Needham gravel and soil, Olmsted commenced landscape architecture work in New York City, winning the design competition for the new Central Park with architect and partner Calvert Vaux in 1854. Great success followed their acclaimed project in Manhattan and, following the Civil War, the Olmsted & Vaux firm developed park space in Brooklyn, Buffalo, Chicago, and other, primarily northern, cities. Though the partnership dissolved amicably in 1872, Olmsted continued plans for university campuses, small squares, and public grounds while maintaining the post of superintendent of Central Park and taking numerous European tours to observe the state of park and urban design, particularly in England and Paris. His firm's move to Brookline in 1878, and the subsequent concentration on the Boston work saw the beginning of his career's mature period.

Leaving his managerial post at Central Park in 1878, Olmsted moved his household and firm to Brookline, MA, just west of the Boston city line. The move converged with an escalation of the metropolis' political and social demand for large-scale park development. Olmsted's availability to his new community created the opportunity for a mature artist to design parks at a mature site. The Back Bay fill, a public works project on par with the Big Dig of the 1990s, was complete just west of Massachusetts Avenue and the city was ripe for further development. A Bostonian wrote to Olmsted during these early planning stages of the Boston Park System: "Boston is a crooked and confused territory; if we ever get it straightened out, it must be in the next or succeeding generations; if we are to have parks, now is the time to secure the lands for the purpose."<sup>iii</sup> Bostonians, late to the table in terms of postbel-

lum urban design, had been hampered by lack of space and political conservatism. With the completion of the Back Bay fill, the maturation of Boston's socio-political vision, as well as the presence of architect-in-residence, Frederick Law Olmsted allowed Boston to possess the most functionally useful and yet subtly designed park system in the United States. It was also the masterstroke of Frederick Law Olmsted's work—the unique places made within the Emerald Necklace communicated a singular investment and consideration on the part of a fully developed artist. Olmsted awakened the spirit of places in Boston previously

disregarded, such as Franklin Park, or outright shunned as at the Back Bay Fens. Through his guidance, the city of Boston constructed a park system for that captured not only the spirit of the contemporary city, but also the one that was to come through the next century.

In 19th century Boston, space was at a premium. Olmsted's park system at once fundamentally shifted the city's future growth toward a spacious, suburban archetype while tangibly manifesting the social mores of Gilded Age Boston. In addition, the spaces created in the special moment where Boston and Olmsted intersect as design and designer demand study of the her-

itage of each individually. The social and political currents underlying Boston's motivation for a park system were representative of attitudes felt in cities nationally. This era's conception of the urban park sought to reclaim sanitary, recreational, scenic, and reformist ideals perceived to have gone astray under intense industrialization and urban expansion. In Boston, each of these motivations took on characteristics particular to New England. Frederick Law Olmsted's Boston system was a composite of his previous work in other cities. These parks manifested the unifica-



RECLAIMED SWAMP ALONG THE MUDDY RIVER CONNECTED PARKS TO THE SOUTH

tion of design principles that addressed the purpose and function of parks, as well as exemplified his naturalistic style, both fully formed by the commencement of his Boston work.

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### OLMSTED: HIS INFLUENCES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS STYLE

Frederick Law Olmsted is largely credited with raising the job of landscape architect to an individual profession. He once wrote to a friend, “If a fairy had shaped [my career], it could not have fitted me better.”<sup>iv</sup> Perhaps it appealed and unified his eclectic interests, as he was to come to park design following many fits and starts in separate careers. He was, in turn, a seaman in youth, a farmer, and a travel writer through the American south. His initial travel writing took a distinct color in response to a tour of England with his brother John and boyhood friend Charles Loring Brace in 1850. It was here that he gazed with farmer’s eyes upon the English countryside, and yet, as biographer Roper comments, “He was more than a farmer, however; he was an ambitious young man consciously working to overcome the handicap of haphazard education . . . He observed, therefore, with the eye not only of a farmer but of a student of society, alert, intelligent, critical, and enthusiastic. His first enthusiasm, spontaneous and lasting, was for the enchanting English countryside.”<sup>v</sup> But the countryside was not the only English landscape to affect Olmsted; the decade-old Birkenhead Park in Liverpool awakened the possibility of bringing the country to the city, even to the laboring classes. The impetus and design of the park contrasted with any seen in American cities, and it became a model from which Olmsted took design cues.

### PARTICULARITIES OF OLMSTED’S PARK DESIGN; ENGLISH AND FRENCH INFLUENCES

The park designs and urban design philosophy of Olmsted were not without precedent. His numerous work-vacations to Europe and the British Isles influenced his style throughout his career and are particularly visible in his cohesive “necklace” system of Boston. The American drew distinct



FRANKLIN PARK UTILIZES NATURALIST AESTHETICS FOR A FUNCTIONAL DESIGN

yet complementary design aspects from British and French parks and urban design. The influence of Liverpool’s Birkenhead, the first of seemingly natural picturesque parks, is witnessed in Olmsted’s “country park” model. Undulant greenspace and lush ramble paths provided recreational and healthful opportunities for city residents. Activities were divided between passive absorption of the space’s positive energy, as simple repose in open space was deemed healthful, and unstructured active pursuits, such as horseback riding and field games. This artificial naturalism, unseen in parks heretofore manicured precisely with flowerbeds and statues, profoundly influenced Olmsted’s later work in his three major “country parks”: Manhattan’s Central Park, Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, and Franklin Park in Boston.

Distinguishing Olmsted’s park design is primarily an adherence to a comprehensive site plan and a unified vision of park space. This differed from previous *ad hoc* delin-

eations of open space, as well as the mid-century eclecticism of American architecture and design. Writing about Central Park, and yet making a statement that foreshadowed his career's design philosophy, Olmsted declared, "The Park throughout is a single work of art, and as such [is] subject of the primary law of every work of art, namely, that it shall be framed upon a single, noble motive, to which the design of all its parts, in some more or less subtle way, shall be confluent and helpful."<sup>vi</sup> His art, crafted in stone and fecund earth, would immerse the visitor in total space. The placement and balance of landscape aesthetics along with formal structures were conceived in the context of a unified park.

The French influence upon Olmsted's design vision was present, though its manifestation in his parks was not as clear. According to Frances Kowsky of the State University of New York at Buffalo, both Olmsted and Vaux toured Paris during its Second Empire reconstruction under Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, and it was both the physical design of the boulevard and the city-wide comprehensive plan that influenced future park design. While still based in New York, he and Vaux began to develop elements crucial to the later "emerald necklaces," metropolitan park systems connected by landscaped boulevards. He first conceived of these boulevards, which he termed "parkways," in relation to Brooklyn's Prospect Park likely in late 1867.<sup>vii</sup> The first public presentation of the idea came in the "Report of the Landscape Architects and Superintendents" to the park's Board of Commissioners the following January. With a functional purpose of connecting Prospect Park to surrounding open space, the parkways conceptually served to link distinct park sites, where a visitor might ride from Fort Hamilton on New York Harbor to Prospect Park, and then north across the East River to Central Park without a break of greenspace.<sup>viii</sup> The plan was, however, improbably broad for the era; Brooklyn and New York were individual, competitive cities and no bridge would be built across the East River until Roebling's suspension opened to traffic in 1883.

When functions were separated by way of landscape design, Olmsted recalled in Boston the comprehensive park system. Galen Cranz, professor of architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, observes the appeal of country aesthetic to a city dweller: "The country has always stood for simplicity, health, peace and quiet, and the stability of personal, family, and community relations . . ."<sup>ix</sup> Olmsted sought to give his parks a feeling of the country, whether they consciously realized it or not. The location of the Boston's Back Bay Fens, the entryway to the city's Emerald Necklace, is particularly challenging in this regard. Olmsted believed in the pertinence of open space to urban character, just as much as in buildings themselves. He wrote, "The park should, as far as possible, complement the town. Openness is the one thing you cannot get in buildings. Picturesqueness you can get. Let your buildings be as picturesque as your artists can make them. This is the beauty of a town. Consequently the beauty of the park should be the other [openness or hollowness]."<sup>x</sup>

Olmsted's artful and united vision soon expanded to include the interplay of multiple parks with the metropolitan area. Years later, Olmsted recounted to the Boston Society of Architects the conversation that first verbalized his plans of a city-wide park system. Discussing with a city engineer the drainage improvement of the Muddy River to the Fens, Olmsted expressed that a southern ingress and its continuity of the park extended the idea: "Then the roads leading up that valley to Jamaica Pond would be the beginning of a Park-way leading from the Back Bay to the Arboretum and West Roxbury Park."<sup>xi</sup> His organizational sensibilities were finely tuned from his experiences with his previous projects, notably Central Park, a hotbed of political intrigue and patronage.<sup>xii</sup> Commissioned to continue Boston's Emerald Necklace with the centerpiece West Roxbury Park, Olmsted requested supervision over all subordinate advisors to solidify his vision and insulate the design team from political influence. A gardener, for example, would be hired based on competence measured by Olmsted rather than as a favor from a city councilman.

It was not only in his pragmatic approach to construction and project management that Olmsted's professional maturity manifested itself. Referring to Olmsted's 1877 work in Montreal, Rybczynski comments, "The artlessness that he had been perfecting since Mount Royal here came to the fore."<sup>xiii</sup> Unlike his early work in New York, his Boston work lacked Victorian ostentation. Jamaica Pond, already existing before Olmsted's project, received no embellishment on the order of Central Park's Bethesda Terrace. The main lodge of Franklin Park, though a large structure, faced away from the meadow and used a rolling, brown roof that blended with the shaded fell. Not only do these design characteristics owe to the Boston Park Commission's frugality, but they also illustrate Olmsted's deftness in exploring his spatial vision.

#### THE IDEOLOGY OF THE BOSTON PARKS MOVEMENT

The upper class Brahmins of Boston, quick to extol the strengths and advantages of their city over those elsewhere in the nation, were not initially warm to the idea of large-scale public parks on the order of Central Park or Birkenhead. In response to New York's park project, the Boston City Council requested a report from a specially appointed commission to investigate its feasibility in their city. Though such construction may be beneficial to the city, physical space was severely limited: "The area of our city is too small to allow the laying out of large tracts of land for Public Parks, and it behooves us to improve the small portions that are left to us for such purposes."<sup>xiv</sup> In turn, the city reconsidered what space was available at the Boston Common and the Public Garden.

The population of Boston concentrated on the head of Shawmut Peninsula became increasingly industrial through the 19th century and the Common's initial purpose as pastureland fell away as cattle were replaced by couples and families on promenade. The Public Garden, situated on newly filled land across Charles Street, lay stagnant till the 1859 park commission adopted a design plan and appropriated funding. The adopted plan, as prominent

urban parks scholar Cynthia Zaitzevsky notes, "displays a certain *horror vacui*; it is so overloaded with 'features' that there is minimal space for trees, shrubs, and grass."<sup>xv</sup> The Garden's chief engineer lessened its extreme formalism, but the contrast between this public space and that of Olmsted is palpable and historically significant.<sup>xvi</sup> Intact until the resuscitation of the parks movement in the 1870s, this small space was the social agora of the Athens of America.

Two significant events in Boston stimulated the parks movement, both occurring in 1870. First, most of the filling of the Back Bay was completed. New edifices were constructed on Commonwealth Avenue and other east-west streets to Exeter Street, as the new land offered space to expand. William Newman and Wilfred Holton, historians of the Back Bay landfill, enumerate several reasons prompting the fill. First, the rapid growth of the shipping and textile industry pushed the resources of Shawmut Peninsula to the limits. Second, the population growth, particularly spurred by Irish immigration, "transform[ed] Boston from a densely settled city into an overcrowded city."<sup>xvii</sup> This overcrowding created severe sanitary concerns. Sewers from the western end of the peninsula and Boston Neck emptied into the dammed Back Bay, which oftentimes was "seen bubbling, like a cauldron, with the noxious gases that are exploding from the corrupting mass below."<sup>xviii</sup> Cholera and malaria were believed to travel through polluted, miasmatic air, which the fill of the Back Bay was to eliminate.

The completion of the Back Bay fill in 1870 coincided with a significant cultural event—Olmsted delivered a major lecture at Boston's Lowell Institute on February 25th of that year. The lecture, entitled "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," addressed the concerns of a Brahmin audience, particularly leaving a physical legacy in a city in which their social and political control grew tenuous as the immigrant population increased. Olmsted advocated park construction that would anticipate the future of a city, rather than its current need. "We have reason to be-

lieve, then,” he argued, “that towns which of late have been increasing rapidly on account of their commercial advantages, are likely to be still more attractive to population in the future.” Minutes later he directed his thesis locally: “It is practically certain that the Boston of to-day is the mere nucleus of the Boston that is to be.”<sup>xix</sup> The lecture audience was large and enthusiastic, and a Bostonian desire to build for their city’s future underlaid the social undercurrents supporting park construction through this period.

The concept of the expanding the city and the park as a solution came in response to several urban ills, widely perceived in American cities at the time, and strongly felt in Boston by the government and influential upper classes. Building was popular on the new landfill, and land speculation was heavy. Sanitation remained an issue; in discussion with a city engineer on the Back Bay Fens, Olmsted supported quick action on park planning as delay halted development westward, largely out of health concerns. Politicians would wrangle over construction budgets and, “Meantime and before many years the Muddy River valley will be very dirty, unhealthy, squalid. No one will want to live in the neighborhood of it. Property will have very little value and there will grow up near the best residence district of the city an unhealthy and pestilential neighborhood.”<sup>xx</sup> The need to provide recreational and scenic benefits to

Bostonians also bolstered arguments for a regional park system. Finally, an element of social reform tinted this period’s park push—a well-designed park may improve the mental and emotional health of a city and a democracy in addition to the physical well being of its citizens.

As described, the pollution of the Back Bay before its fill caused great consternation amid the Boston medical community. Following its completion, great mudflats remained to the west of Exeter Street where the drainage of the Muddy River and Stony Brook were hindered. It was here in the Back Bay that Frederick Law Olmsted commenced his Boston work, for common belief held that parks were beneficial to a city’s sanitation. Yet parks in general were believed to purify air—in Olmsted’s address to the Lowell Institute, he remarked, “Air is disinfected by sunlight and foliage. Foliage also acts mechanically to purify the air by screening it.”<sup>xxi</sup> Dubious as this science is, the rhetoric was strong and was a significant motivator behind Boston’s park construction. The park was often described as “lungs for the city.”<sup>xxii</sup> The medical community in Boston testified to the City Council on behalf of park construction, and the American Medical Association’s Committee on Public Hygiene added, “The necessity for public squares, tastefully ornamented and planted with trees, cannot be too strongly urged upon the public attention, as one of the most powerful correctives to the vitiated air with in the reach of the inhabitants of a populous place.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Miasmatic air from the built environment would pass through parks, be cleansed, and benefit citizens nearby or within the space.

Yet for the common city resident, not salubrity but rather spatial liberation fueled park support. The dense city disallowed sweeping recreational activity or even sedate outings. Through the 1830s and 40s, urbanites used what space was available. Rural cemeteries constructed outside city limits, famously Mount Auburn in Cambridge, became popular public spaces for repose or, scandalously, promenading and recreation.<sup>xxiv</sup> The very reason for relocating cemeteries, as cadavers were supposed to bear disease, was

OLMSTED’S “COUNTRY PARKS” PROVIDED A PASTORAL REPRIEVE FROM THE URBAN LANDSCAPE



subverted in popular use. The replacement of cemeteries by park space for recreation was, therefore, promoted in conjunction with health concerns. Alexander Jackson Downing, friend of Olmsted and an early proponent of Central Park, recognized the spaces' appeal: "In the absence of great public parks . . . our rural cemeteries are doing a great deal to enlarge and educate the popular taste in rural embellishment."<sup>xxv</sup> Active sports were shunned in favor of receptive recreation, restful picnicking and walking tours. Only through the 1890s, when the Boston system was more or less complete, did park users adapt parkland for athletic use, particularly in light of the exploding popularity of tennis and bicycling.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Because receptive recreation was the expected activity of park visitors, the scenic aspects of parkland were an important link between an individual's mental state and the surrounding environment. City politicians and planners, Olmsted among them, believed in the restorative effects of natural landscapes on a visitor. Quoting Oxford lecturer John Ruskin, Olmsted extolled, "You will never love art till you love what she mirrors better."<sup>xxvii</sup> This was particularly true in Boston, where Transcendentalist philosophy informed Brahmin political and social attitudes. The restorative qualities of nature are exemplified in a statement of Henry David Thoreau: "Would it to be a luxury to stand up to one's chin in some retired swamp for a whole summer's day . . . ? Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps."<sup>xxviii</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote similar exhortations encouraging country life, but probably favored a union of the town and country: "I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children," he wrote in the *Journal*, "and I wish city facility and polish."<sup>xxix</sup>

As discussed above, Olmsted's parks were distinct spaces from the surrounding city—*rus in urbe*, rather than merely green decoration. Urban wage-laborers did not have the opportunity to travel and enjoy nature; therefore, a constructed, naturalistic landscape was brought to them. In addition, a park system like Olmsted's in Boston expanded access to the parks. Even though Franklin Park was far to a man living along Washington Street in the South End, he may have walked along the Riverway and Arborway south to enter the park at Jamaica Plain. This distinct scenery, the country in the city, could be used for an individual's mental well-being.

Yet some support for park construction was not limited to the individual but to the betterment of society at large. This possibility formed the basis for reformist conceptions of park benefits. In a progressive sense, the park was considered a place of democratic engagement. A.J. Downing remarked that social barriers should dissolve in open green space: "We owe it to ourselves and our republican professions to set about establishing a larger and more fraternal spirit in our social life."<sup>xxx</sup> They allowed for the "intercourse of all classes" in Downing's words, and were to Stephen Duncan Walker "a commonwealth, a kind of democracy, where the poor, the rich, the mechanic, the merchant and the man of letters, mingle on a footing of perfect equality."<sup>xxxi</sup> Meanwhile, on the individual level, as alluded to in the previous paragraph, a park may influence behavior. Natural morality was believed the highest morality and the restorative and socially beneficial qualities of the outdoors pacified of urban angst. Even if landscapes were not explicitly pedagogical—and Olmsted's certainly were not, lacking in all but the sparsest statuary and memorials—they could subtly serve to reform a population. Family

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outings in these naturalist places of repose were encouraged. Parks, and Olmsted's designs in particular, are in some ways devices to influence human behavior, making monumental the status quo, constructing "natural spaces" with intentions of pacifying residents' urban angst.

Though ideological reasons for park construction theoretically applied to all city residents, and though Olmsted's comprehensive system was better than many others at "democratizing" green space, the politics involved in the approval process were extremely parochial. Interestingly, Stephen Hardy notes that this potential hindrance actually encouraged the far-flung geography of Olmsted's vision. Every neighborhood councilman desired an emerald, and negative votes on park appropriations come from wards the most distant from the proposed park at issue.<sup>xxxii</sup> Localized support was so strong that the system eventually strung east from Franklin Park along a widened Columbia Road through South Boston to Castle Island.

#### OLMSTED'S HAND IN BOSTON

The city of Boston and its landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted conjoined on a municipal park system at a period crucial for both parties. Historian Stephen Hardy states Boston's perspective best: "Boston needed parks to preserve her environment, her health, and her morality. But she also needed parks to prove her legitimacy as a first-class American city."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Olmsted agreed in 1886 when he wrote, "Boston is moving in a more simply evolutionary and democratic way . . . Any sterling addition to it is worth more to the reputation and commercial 'good-will' of the city than an addition of the same cost to its shops, banks, hotels, street railroads, or newspapers."<sup>xxxiv</sup> The meaning of the Boston system to its architect was significant as well. Olmsted took up residence in Brookline, just a mile west of his Riverway and Leverett Park. It was the project most extensive in scale of his mature period following his departure from New York, and he wrote to his firm: "Nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work . . . I would have you decline any business that would stand in the way of doing the best for Boston all the time."<sup>xxxv</sup> This

commitment on the part the designer only reinforces the special nature of his Boston spaces.

The first of Olmsted's projects in Boston illustrates the creativity and mature vision with which he solved Boston's topographical issues. When constructed in the 1880s, the Fens were the new western edge of the Boston. Olmsted designed the narrow park to border a meandering brackish stream, the Muddy River, from its origins further south to the Charles, draining the Back Bay's landfill in the process. Kathy Poole draws attention to Olmsted's maintenance of "the full aesthetic, the complete sensibility of the former fens landscape—its expansiveness, the waving of the marsh grasses, the blustery winds, the tidal flux. His landscape embraced citizens' memories as well as the site's ecological memory."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Old photographs reveal dirt roads bordering the park and sparse construction. Rybczynski recalls that "Olmsted recommended that Richardson design the two main bridges. Thus was a work of engineering transformed. It was not intended to be a work of art . . . it was to appear as undisturbed nature within the city."<sup>xxxvii</sup> These improvements, with a particular eye to the former appearance of the space, contrast with the conventional solution to the problem. The city engineers consulting with Olmsted proposed concrete conduits, both expensive and insensitive to the neighborhood aesthetics.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Twenty years back in Central Park, he allowed for a reservoir thoroughly industrial in appearance, and attempted to incorporate it into the park setting only through heavy planting. Experience had taught him advanced solutions that benefited the overall outcome of a project.

Geoffrey Blodgett, political and social historian of Massachusetts, recognizes the spatial advantages of Olmsted's work: "The loosely strong, cumulative quality of Olmsted's Boston park system, following topography and residential growth from city to suburb, offered a much less constricted setting for his designs than Central Park."<sup>xxxix</sup> Olmsted's greenspace surrounding Jamaica Pond or the majority of Franklin Park contrasted sharply in its aesthetic interaction with the community. Lawrence

Kennedy, commenting upon 1820s activity on Boston Common describes it as, “a popular spot where pushcart and food vendors hawked their wares.”<sup>xli</sup> It and the Public Garden were, according to David Schuyler, “essentially urban spaces—less escapes from the relentless cityscape than extensions of it.”<sup>xlii</sup> The Emerald Necklace is not much an addition to the Boston cityscape, but rather a separate entity superimposed upon the land. Cynthia Zaitzevsky contemplates Olmsted’s legacy: “His ideal of comprehensive, regional planning of open space has become an established precept of professional landscape architects and city planners, and his fervent belief in the value of natural scenery near densely settled urban centers is increasingly appreciated in today’s climate of environmental awareness.”<sup>xliii</sup> In a city plagued through the 19th century by spatial limitation, Olmsted served to preserve green space that would, a century later, maintain a distinct spirit.

#### A MEDITATION UPON SPACE

Upon entering a building, visitors may or may not realize the architect’s plans for eliciting a behavioral response from them. The response can be thoroughly emotional for the visitor depending on the scale and floor plan. It is the same in planned outdoor space. Few gazed out from Schoolmaster Hill in Franklin Park and did not feel utterly overwhelmed with the view; the absence of any urbanization, the rolling meadow ending in a dense forest beyond. Even in parks there is an engineered traffic flow; tourists and visitors would move from the Country Park’s meadow east to the Playstead, and then promenade down the wide Greeting, a formal element of Franklin Park serving as the transition between the park’s nature and the urbanity of Blue Hill Avenue a quarter mile away. In buildings, particularly monumental ones like cathedrals and civic institutions, a visitor may acknowledge a certain loss of control. A building draws one in and influences not only emotions but also activities, simply because of its design.

Perhaps out in the open one is less aware of a space’s influence. One is *outside*—free will should dominate as an individual determines his or her succeeding actions and moti-

ations. But an outdoor space—a neighborhood, a park, a city square—may dictate behavior of the population experiencing it better than an individual building. Many will pass through a space on the way to another destination rather than around it. A building in this case would be an impediment and the individual moves around it, reacting to it only externally, if it calls forth emotion at all. A second characteristic of outdoor space is that a certain portion of the population will use it as a destination in itself, particularly if design evokes a pleasurable emotional response. Like a building, a visitor may be unable to enunciate why a park’s winding trail is particularly pleasing, or how a street corner’s brick paving and wrought iron newspaper stand communicates culture. Yet they return to these areas for repose and commerce alike, perhaps passing through in the morning on the way to work and returning to sit for tea and people-watching.

THE BOATHOUSE AT JAMAICA POND ILLUSTRATES MODIFICATION FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE USE OF PARK FEATURES



Frederick Law Olmsted had an eye for detecting a spirit unseen in the original topography. Like the ashen fields of the Central Park site covered with shanty towns, the mudflats of the remainder of the Back Bay were an unlikely site for any greenery, much less recreation. Though Olmsted insisted upon its function as a sanitary improvement, its use as a ferny place of tranquility apart from the Back Bay has

been constant from its completion in the early 1880s. Similarly, Franklin Park was an undistinguished site in West Roxbury, a mere hill and pasture. But the view from the hill was modified to form a broad vista, and the Wilderness in the north allowed the visitor to ramble through a New England forest, two short miles from the most cosmopolitan of American cities.

## ENDNOTES

- i. Pope, *Epistle IV to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, The Poems of Alexander Pope* (lines 57-64)
- ii. Olmsted, "Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters," 1886 (470)
- iii. Haughton to Olmsted (883)
- iv. Olmsted, in Kelly (75)
- v. Roper (68)
- vi. Olmsted & Vaux as quoted in Kelly (9)
- vii. The nature of Olmsted's parkways should here be distinguished from that of boulevards constructed concurrently in Paris. Baron Eugène Haussmann, who controlled the reconfiguration of Paris under Napoleon III, engaged a plan of construction of large boulevards through the medieval city for purposes military and, nominally, sanitary. While Haussmann's work is imperial in scale and attitude, the impetus and manifestation of Olmsted's American parkways is markedly residential and recreational. The influence Olmsted cited multiple times in his report to the Prospect Park Commissioners was Berlin's Unter den Linden and Thiergarten, while Parisian boulevards are mentioned only for their function as military thoroughfares.
- viii. Olmsted, Report of the Landscape Architects and Superintendents to the Board of Commissioners of Prospect Park. 1 January 1868. (137)
- ix. Cranz (45)
- x. Olmsted, *Public Parks* (49-50) as quoted in Creese (195)
- xi. Olmsted, "Paper on the Problem and Its Solution Read Before the Boston Society of Architects," April 2, 1886, quoted in Rybczynski (343-44)
- xii. Shortly following his dismissal from the Central Park superintendency, Olmsted published a pamphlet titled "Spoils of the Park" which criticized the organizational structure and the management under the Tammany Hall political machine.
- xiii. Rybczynski (361)
- xiv. City of Boston, Report on the Committee on the Improvement of the Public Garden, October 31, 1859. Quoted in Zaitzevsky (34)
- xv. Zaitzevsky (34)
- xvi. This period's incarnation of the Public Garden and the Commonwealth Avenue Mall are significant examples of French rationalist influence. Though both spaces were later appropriated by Olmsted into the citywide necklace, Commonwealth Avenue is more like a Parisian boulevard than

any of Olmsted's Boston parkways. The city prescribed uniform cornice heights, setbacks, and building materials, much the same as Haussmann did.

- xvii. Newman (45)
- xviii. Boston City Doc, No 14. 1850. Quoted in Newman (41)
- xix. Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," February 25, 1870 (176 & 181, respectively)
- xx. Olmsted, "Paper on the Problem and Its Solution Read Before the Boston Society of Architects," April 2, 1886, quoted in Rybczynski (343)
- xxi. Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," February 25, 1870 (182)
- xxii. A common phrase at the time and presently to describe the effect of parks on a city's atmosphere. Olmsted used it himself in "Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park."
- xxiii. Schuyler (61)
- xxiv. Particularly informative is Schuyler's chapter, "Didactic Landscapes: Rural Cemeteries" (37-56)
- xxv. A.J. Downing as quoted in Schuyler (55)
- xxvi. Hardy (80-81)
- xxvii. Olmsted, "Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters" 1886 (525)
- xxviii. Thoreau, *Excursions*, as quoted in Creese (177)
- xxix. Emerson as quoted in Schuyler (32)
- xxx. A.J. Downing as quoted in Schuyler (65)
- xxxi. Downing and Walker as quoted in Schuyler (65)
- xxxii. Hardy (77)
- xxxiii. Hardy (71)
- xxxiv. Olmsted, "Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters" 1886 (525)
- xxxv. Olmsted to firm partners, 1893 as quoted in Zaitzevsky (vii)
- xxxvi. Poole (<http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/backbay/fenssite/html/docs/marginal.html>)
- xxxvii. Rybczynski (343)
- xxxviii. Olmsted, "Paper on the {Back Bay} Problem and its Solution Read Before the Boston Society of Architects," April 2, 1886 (450)
- xxxix. Blodgett (885)
- xl. Kennedy (34)
- xli. Schuyler (67)
- xlii. Zaitzevsky (4)

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