

Nels Abrams

HIST 7001

Dr. Mitchell

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Didactic Landscapes:

Public Parks and their role in Reform

Frederick Law Olmsted considered himself an artist and, as such, he zealously guarded his works of art, urban public parks. And he would have to. Machine politicians constantly interfered with the construction and design of Central Park. Tammany newspapers ridiculed Olmsted as effeminate and proposed several additions to the park's seemingly wasted space.¹ He responded by fighting tooth and nail to prohibit intrusions such as race tracks and cemeteries. In addition to struggling with working class representatives, Olmsted faced skepticism from the cultural elite. Not believing the uneducated laborers capable of proper Victorian behavior, many expressed concern that Central Park would turn into a massive beer garden.² Undaunted, Olmsted continued to transform the land into his vision of pastoral beauty.

Olmsted's unwavering commitment to his design, however, transcended the simple scenario of artistic integrity. During the Victorian era "high" art was didactic; Olmsted intended his parks not to entertain, but to influence, visitors.³ He sincerely believed that Central Park, if done right, could strengthen American democracy and "improve" individual visitors. Historians today

¹ Blodgett, 882

² Scheper, 389

³ Scheper, 372

debate whether he was interested in helping the lower class or reforming them to Victorian standards. The truth is that it is not an either/or question. Olmsted was motivated by both democracy *and* reform. The two issues were complimentary, as he hoped to strengthen democracy by extending Victorian values throughout the working class. Following a Romantic tradition of belief in the power of nature, Central Park's bubbling brooks and open meadows were designed to improve morality through a subtle, sub-conscious process.

As the century came to a close, park design changed. Victorian America had been transformed by Theodore Roosevelt and the new strenuous ideal of masculinity.⁴ Being a respectable gentleman remained important, but the image of a gentleman was now physical and moral superiority, not self-restraint and sophistication. Park design reflected the new values, featuring athletic fields and entertainment facilities. Progressive park managers replaced Olmsted's emphasis on subtle influence for explicit reform measures, arguing that leadership was necessary for adequate reform and that "the mere presence of open space (is) not enough."⁵ And, while improving American democracy continued to influence park management, the primary emphasis became "strengthening" the white middle class. These changes in park design and use paralleled a larger, national shift in the elite's relationship with the masses.

Concern for the poor and a desire to improve American democracy were central motivations for Olmsted. From a young age he sought opportunities to address what he perceived as moral issues in society. Beginning in 1852 and spanning over five years, Olmsted traveled through the South writing articles critical of the morality and efficiency of slavery. Ironically, it was during

⁴ Higham, John. 78

⁵ Boyer, 240

this time that he was compelled to look deeper at the injustices within the urban society of the north. A Southern man, it appears, convincingly argued that the moral indignation of northern abolitionists rang hollow in the context of the industrial economy's deplorable conditions for its workers. Olmsted decided that the "poor and wicked need more than to be left alone," and that the elite should "more directly assist the poor and degraded to elevate themselves."⁶ For the remainder of his life Olmsted would be involved in projects in accord with this view.

During the Civil War Olmsted acted as the General Secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission. In this capacity Olmsted organized medical support for tens of thousands of soldiers. The Sanitary Commission was the largest non-governmental organization ever created at that time. In 186_ Olmsted helped found the American Social Science Association (ASSA). This organization embodied the elitist perspective that favored charity as the appropriate method of dealing with the masses. The charter of ASSA emphasized the "responsibilities of the gifted and educated classes toward the weak, the witless, and the ignorant."⁷ In 1881 he joined the Civil Service Reform Association, another elitist organization dedicated to improving urban society. Olmsted's parks, although they ultimately defined his career, can be seen as one of many achievements in a life dedicated to activism.

Olmsted intended his parks to improve the lives of visitors. He hoped to achieve this, foremost, by providing a place for rest and the contemplation of nature for those who did not have the means to go to the countryside. In 1858 Olmsted wrote that his parks would "supply the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the

⁶ Bender, 169

⁷ Blodgett, 875

country, a specimen of God’s handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month or two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances.”⁸ Also, to use a popular phrase from the era, urban parks served as the “lungs of the city” and were thought to provide relief from harmful gases known as miasmas.⁹ Olmsted took great pride in the fact that physicians in New York actually prescribed visits to Central Park to improve the health of their patients.¹⁰

Underlying Olmsted’s efforts to assist the working class was Victorian anxiety surrounding the changing nature of American society—from *gesellschaft* to *gemeinschaft*—and a desire to “save” America from increasing ethnic social and political power.¹¹ It is this anxiety, this resistance to a pluralistic society full of ethnic differences, which prompts some historians to label Olmsted a “conservative.”¹² There is truth to that interpretation; Olmsted sought to preserve and expand the values of his New England youth rather than embrace the diversity of 19th century America.¹³ And he would certainly agree with the photographer and writer Jacob Riis that “it is a dreary old truth that those who would fight *for* the poor must *fight* the poor to do it.”¹⁴ Similar to a missionary, Olmsted sincerely wanted to help, but felt supporting their own aspirations would be detrimental. Instead, he sought to inculcate Victorian values in those he

⁸ Bender, 179

⁹ Blodgett, 878

¹⁰ Scheper, 396

¹¹ Scheper, 386

¹² Blodgett, essay title

¹³ Bender, xii urban vision

¹⁴ Boyer, 176

viewed as inferior or naïve. For this reason, he often emphasized the transformative effect of his parks.

The pastoral park, despite its idyllic appearance, was “not simply a pleasure ground.”¹⁵ Through the medium of landscape architecture Olmsted hoped to transform the unruly working class into suitable American citizens. In 1870 he argued that Central Park “exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and lawless classes of the city,—an influence to courtesy, self-control, and temperance.”¹⁶ An observer concurred, noting that while in parks, “rude, noisy fellows...become hushed, moderate, and careful.”¹⁷ In the minds of Olmsted and his fellow elitist reformers, the working class, if exposed to elevating influences such as parks, museums, and libraries, would recognize the “natural order” of society and stop supporting labor unionism and machine politics.

Of course, the working class recipients of Victorian largesse did not see things in the same light. Instead, they resented the attempts to interfere in their leisure time. Newspapers ridiculed the numerous rules and stuffy atmosphere of pastoral parks. And millions of people expressed their disapproval by going to Coney Island and other locations. These early amusement parks did not attempt to teach or discipline its customers. Conversely, they thrived on the burgeoning consumerism and frivolity of American culture. The elite response to this criticism was condescension; Victorian Americans believed the working class was too uneducated to appreciate sophisticated pleasures.

¹⁵ Levine, 202

¹⁶ Bender, 180 urban vision

¹⁷ Levine, 202

For the Victorians, the popularity of Coney Island—at its peak more than 200, 000 people visited daily—indicated the barbarous state of urban culture. Adopting either environmentalist or coercive tactics, the self-proclaimed “defenders of American culture” tried to mold the truculent masses into the Victorian mold. Olmsted and his lifelong friend and fellow activist, Charles Loring Brace, shared a preference for the subtle, environmentalist influence. Parks, museums, and libraries proliferated throughout the late 1800’s in the belief that “one of the best modes of driving out low tastes in the masses is to introduce higher.”¹⁸

Urban parks were a large part of the Victorian strategy for cultural reform. Based on a romantic faith in the “elevating and restorative power of nature” Olmsted designed his parks to mimic idealized nature.¹⁹ Trips to English parks and the Panama Canal heavily influenced his sense of aesthetics, which featured wide, green pastures, trees, and small streams.²⁰ In addition to personal experience, Olmsted was shaped by his romantic predecessors. European romantics Goethe and Wordsworth were followed by American transcendentalists in their praise of nature. In Thoreau’s essay *Walking* he writes “will not man grow to perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?”²¹ But how, exactly, does nature improve man? Olmsted’s theory on the effect of scenery was that “gradually and silently the charm comes over us; we know not exactly where or how.”²²

¹⁸ Levine, 203

¹⁹ Boyer, 238

²⁰ Beveridge, 36

²¹ Scheper, 374

²² Beveridge, 34

The most powerful influence of nature was, according to Olmsted, sub-conscious. Attempts to force the appreciation of nature's beauty were destined to fail, for "no guide's favor will obtain you her favor, no abrupt demand; hardly will she bear questioning, or direct, curious gazing at her beauty."²³ It is this belief that compelled Olmsted to make a sharp distinction between landscape architecture and gardening—a practice he saw as artificial. Eighteenth century physician Johann Zimmerman and Olmsted's contemporary, theologian Horace Bushnell, convinced him of the power of sub-conscious influence. Zimmerman's treatise *Solitude* had such an impact that Olmsted described it as "one of the best books ever written."²⁴ And Bushnell was Olmsted's family minister in Harford. Both men argued the transformative power of nature could not be forced. Grace instead of good works, we could say. Olmsted combined romantic sensibilities with faith in sub-conscious influence to design parks that would, like music or art, inspire visitors in a way that cannot be articulated through words. The anticipated result was a general recognition throughout the populace of the benefits and truth of Victorian morality.

Olmsted's pastoral parks, which were always islands of Victorian values in heterogeneous cities, eventually became too incongruent with the diverse perspectives of the urban populace to attract sufficient public support and funding. After decades of immigration the cultural diversity of cities made any attempts to recreate the idealized homogeneity of early America an impossibility. More significant, however, were changes within the white, Protestant elite; a demographic that continued to exercise a disproportionate influence in public affairs. Several major changes in national society transformed the Victorian community. For one, ideals of self-

²³ Beveridge, 34

²⁴ Scheper, 374

restraint and sophistication were cast aside in favor of aggressive domination. Also, the emergence of the corporate economy eliminated the emphasis on self-sufficiency and its cultural icon, the self-made man. The new economy changed the way things were done; organization and leadership geared towards maximizing efficiency characterize the era. Lastly, Christianity relaxed from the fire-and-brimstone days of Calvinism into a more liberal creed. This allowed a new generation of would-be Victorians to guiltlessly enjoy material comforts and unproductive leisure.

Parks built during the Progressive Era reflected the new, post-Victorian reality of American society. Smaller and more “efficient,” Progressive parks featured supervision, athletics, and organized leisure activities. Of course, there was no clean break. Many people still believed in the civilizing influence of Olmsted’s pastoral parks. Others simply preferred the aesthetics of Victorian parks. The divergence in opinion led to tension between the advocates of competing visions for public space. For example, a Progressive park enthusiast caustically commented that Victorian parks were called breathing spaces “because breathing was about all that was permitted to do in them.”²⁵ Victorians saw Progressive parks as “a group of swings, slides, and all the other forms of violent exercise, disregarding almost entirely the value of natural beauty.”²⁶ Regardless of the rift, the writing was on the wall: Victorian parks no longer expressed the dominant cultural values of the time.

Stanley Hall and Joseph Lee were leaders of the Progressive movement and they ensured organization was an integral element of the parks. Their belief in the importance of organization

²⁵ Boyer, 244

²⁶ Boyer, 245

was shared by a majority of Americans, as corporations were demonstrating the possibilities of good planning. Frederick Winslow Taylor's wildly popular monograph "The Principles of Scientific Management" perfectly captures the era's fascination with efficiency.²⁷ Progressive parks brought the specialization of the city right into the heart of public leisure, a clear departure from Olmsted's attempt to create a refuge from the city in Victorian parks. Instead of subconscious influence from pastoral nature, Progressive parks featured kindergartens, playgrounds, clubs, and other facilities and organizations designed to explicitly instruct children; games, reformers argued, were superior to play. A powerful example of the new methodology took place at a model playground in 1910 when "at the stroke of a gong, the assembled children began to play, the younger ones turning out identical, symmetrical sand pies."²⁸

Day-to-day leadership was the key to implementing the organization sought by Progressive park advocates. In a 1908 parks commissioners' report "competent supervision" was emphasized, due to the belief that "mere playgrounds without intelligent and sympathetic supervision of the play of children will be barren of the best results."²⁹ With proper supervision, on the other hand, the culture of public parks could be transformed, could become more effective at raising disciplined and moral children. It was this transformation of park culture that is the lasting legacy of Progressive parks, as few new parks were actually built during that time.³⁰ To obtain the caliber of leadership necessary to establish the desired culture, applicants for employment at

²⁷ Pragmatism and efficiency would reign supreme until Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne skewered the perspective in light of America's rudderless response to WWI.

²⁸ Boyer, 244

²⁹ Rosenzweig, 146

³⁰ Rosenzweig, 147

the parks had to meet stringent requirements. It was not enough to be a good employee, one had to also be seen as a good person.

The new generation of park leaders differed from their predecessors in many respects. For one, they came from a different segment of society; architects, engineers, and businessmen, they were part of the emerging middle class, while Victorian park leaders were largely members of the cultural elite. Additionally, they envisioned athletics and organized, strenuous activity as a primary feature of parks whereas Olmsted, although never as contrary to sports as he has been portrayed, saw athletics as a distraction to his pastoral designs. The growing appreciation for healthy recreation was the result of several developments: increased leisure time, a dissipating taboo on being “idle,” the influence of immigrants’ cultures (in particular, German), and a growing anxiety about the perceived weakness of Protestant America. A sports craze was sweeping across the country both within and outside the parks. In 1917, the mayor of Worcester, Massachusetts, George Wright, demonstrated the new perspective on public space by renaming the Parks Commission the Parks and Recreation Commission.³¹

The transformation in public parks around the turn of the 20th century paralleled the changes taking place in cultural institutions across America. Museums and libraries, for example, played a significant part in Victorian cultural reform efforts and both institutions sought to, like Olmsted’s parks, civilize the working class into Victorian respectability. At first, museums attempted to instill religious obedience by closing on Sunday.³² They also prohibited canes in

³¹ Rosenzweig, 142

³² Bender, NYI 170

order to protect the art from vandalism³³. The general public, however, had to work six days a week. If the museum was closed Sunday, their only day off, the very people the museum intended to civilize would not be able to visit. Museums eventually recognized the need to accommodate the working class and opened on Sundays.

The genteel guardians of public libraries originally tried to instill Victorian morality by banning a number of popular books deemed improper.³⁴ The motivation for the black-list was based on ethical and not literary considerations, as the best-selling novels of this time rejected traditional authority. Specifically, most of the controversial books undermined the Victorian role for women in society. The public responded to this attempt to control their reading choices by not going to the library. Like the museums, libraries decided it was necessary to loosen their grip in order to exert any influence, and “by 1900 public library leaders had all but given up an attempt to discredit best-selling fiction.”³⁵

Perhaps the clearest parallel to the changes within public parks took place in the realm of charity. Concurrent with the explosion of Victorian parks in the 1870s and 80s, charity organizations proliferated throughout the country—reaching over one hundred by 1890. These organizations believed that, contrary to the small town, cities separated the poor from the moral influence of the Victorian middle class. The result was widespread vice and degeneracy among the masses. Charity organizations attempted to rectify this problem by sending “friendly visitors” into the slums. Sharing Olmsted’s faith in the power of subconscious influence, each visitor attempted to

³³ Mark Twain humorously ridiculed the latter by wondering in jest how he would be able to poke holes in the paintings without his cane.

³⁴ Cotkin, 108

³⁵ Howe, 159 VA

“impart their own virtues” to their assigned families “almost by osmosis.”³⁶ Again, it was important the lessons were not explicit; visitors took care not to reveal their didactic intentions. The relationship between the visitor and the poor families appeared natural, but was actually meticulously crafted, just as Olmsted’s parks.

The Progressive era transformed the charity movement. Starting in the late 1880s, settlement houses began operating in cities like New York and Chicago. Led by Jane Addams, settlement houses replaced “friendly visitors” as the pre-eminent form of charity. Based on differing beliefs, from the beginning “relations between the upstart settlement movement and the older charity organization societies were strained,” with the younger generation placing more emphasis on environmental factors.³⁷ Progressive settlement volunteers, who were predominantly college-educated women, rejected the pretensions of moral superiority characteristic of charity workers. Jane Addams’s 1902 book *Democracy and Social Ethics* mocked the “daintily clad charitable visitor” who treated the poor with “kindly contempt.”³⁸ Victorian charity workers did not hand over the reins quietly. Charity Organization Society leader Mary Richmond considered the youthful settlement house volunteers naïve, abandoning their own beliefs for the radical views of the anarchists and socialists they were meant to teach.

America’s urban parks changed dramatically as the dominant national culture transitioned from Victorianism to Progressive; which makes sense, as public landscape is simply “a material

³⁶ Boyer, 153

³⁷ Boyer, 155

³⁸ Boyer, 158

statement of the pervasive ideals of their time.”³⁹ The Victorian parks, shaped in large part by the hands of the great Frederick Law Olmsted, attempted to civilize the cities by elevating the poor to Victorian standards. This was not class activism *per se* because the dominant intellectual paradigm of the era, Victorianism, did not recognize class interests. As pre-Darwinian Christians and disciples of the Enlightenment, American Victorians believed in discernable universal truths and goods—a perspective more at home among the founding fathers than the more recent era of Jacksonian partisanship.

The method for obtaining the desired civilizing effect of Victorian parks was sub-conscious influence, belying a faith in Romantic naturalism and infectious morality. This approach was prevalent throughout the era’s attempts at social reform, such as the “friendly visitors” of charity organizations. With the dramatic changes in American society at the turn of the century, however, both the intentions and methods of public space transformed. Progressive parks reflected the emerging values of masculinity, organization, and explicit reform. Although history does not fit neatly into chapters, the changes were significant enough to warrant description as “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s.”⁴⁰ So what, exactly, occurred during this epoch-forming decade to cause America to reinvent itself as modern and Progressive? We have vaguely addressed the increased “efficiency” of the era and the new conception of masculinity. To understand the question of cultural change at the start of the twentieth century it will be necessary to explore these topics deeper and tie them in with concurrent economic and religious developments.

³⁹ Ward, 663

⁴⁰ Higham, title