Constructing Nature:  
The Legacy of  
Frederick Law Olmsted  

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Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) left a legacy of wonderful places, from Central Park to Boston’s “Emerald Necklace,” from Niagara Falls to Yosemite. Few people now recognize these as built landscapes. Most are startled to learn that New York’s Central Park was constructed, that even the Ramble is an “artful wilderness,” and that Boston’s Fens and Riverway were molded out of polluted mudflats, planted to grow into tidal marsh and floodplain forest. Even those few who recognize Central Park and the Fens as constructions are surprised at how extensively the experiences of Niagara Falls and Yosemite are shaped by design, for these have come to stand as monuments of nature untouched by human artifice.¹

Olmsted’s contemporaries certainly recognized that landscapes like Central Park and the Fens were designed and built. After all, they were familiar with the previous appearances of those sites and the lengthy and ambitious process of transformation. However, this popular realization soon faded. Olmsted was so skillful at concealing the artifice that both the projects he had so brilliantly constructed and the profession he had worked so hard to establish became largely invisible. Today the works of the profession of landscape architecture are often not “seen,” not understood as having been designed and deliberately constructed, even when the landscape has been radically reshaped. Many landmarks of landscape architecture are assumed to be works of nature or felicitous, serendipitous products of culture. This blindness prevents their appreciation as artful answers to knotty questions of conflicting environmental values and competing purposes.
Olmsted is justly recognized and remembered for his built works, but his legacy consists of far more than places. He was a pragmatic visionary who, through a fusion of theory and practice, shaped the American landscape from city to wilderness. He was a pivotal figure in the formative years of the conservation movement and struggled with issues that still face American society. In his report on Yosemite he urged that such extraordinary places be made accessible to all and not remain the property of an elite. At Niagara he worked with the “processes of nature” to form a frame for the falls. At Biltmore he constructed a forest “out of whole cloth” and planned its management for pleasure and utility. In Boston’s Fens and Riverway he employed the lessons of a lifetime to transform urban landscapes polluted by waste into habitats that enhanced human health, safety, and welfare, while they reintroduced a sense of the wild into the heart of the city.

Much of Olmsted’s work, written and built, is remarkably fresh a century after his retirement, but its potential has not been fully explored and realized. Projects that should have been widely replicated were forgotten, then occasionally reinvented, or they were misunderstood, then poorly imitated. Lately, admirers have praised the pastoral scenery of Olmsted’s urban parks, while critics have attacked his ideas that exposure to such scenery would improve the morals of working-class people.2 Admirers and critics alike have focused upon the specifics of his expression, whether formal or verbal, and have neglected the larger significance of his vision and methods. Olmsted’s legacy needs reclaiming.

Yosemite

Yosemite was the first tract of wild land set aside by an act of Congress, in 1864, “for public use, resort, and recreation.”3 There was no precedent in the United States for such an action, and Olmsted was asked to chair a commission to recommend what should be done with Yosemite. In 1865 he outlined the case for preserving Yosemite and the strategies for managing it. His view was frankly anthropocentric: Yosemite should be preserved because it had value for humans; to be in a place surrounded by “natural scenery” promoted human health and welfare. Such scenery, he felt, should never be private property, but should be held in trust for public purposes, for its importance to the nation was comparable to strategic, defensive points along national boundaries. Without government action to assure “free enjoyment” for all citizens, Olmsted predicted, places like Yosemite would become “rich men’s parks” and the public would be barred from the beneficial effects of its scenery. He cited the example of Great Britain, where “the enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country” was the “monopoly . . . of a very few, very rich people.”4

In 1865, the year of Olmsted’s report, several hundred people visited Yosemite. Visitors had to hire a guide and horses and travel three to four
days, for forty miles along a "very poor trail." Olmsted’s proposals for Yosemite were deceptively simple: provide free access for all visitors in a manner that preserved the valley’s scenic qualities. He proposed that a public road be constructed to connect Yosemite with the nearest road and that five cabins be built in the valley, convenient to camping places and each providing at least one free room for public use. He proposed paths and prospects to shape visitors’ experience of Yosemite by directing their movement and gaze. To enhance an individual’s experience of this scenery without the distracting intrusion of “artificial construction,” he recommended building a narrow, one-way trail in a circuit around the valley, concealed by trees so that it would be invisible to viewers gazing from one side to another.⁵

Olmsted read his report to the other commissioners and a handful of journalists and friends in August 1865. He returned to New York soon after this meeting, and the report was never submitted to the California legislature. There is evidence that it was suppressed by several commissioners who felt that it conflicted with their own political and financial interests (one held the sole charter to build a toll road from the nearest railroad to Yosemite and to run a stagecoach line along it).⁶ One of the journalists present at the reading, Samuel Bowles, was publisher of the Springfield Republican. He reported Olmsted’s ideas and urged that New York preserve such places as Niagara Falls for popular use.⁷

To Olmsted the significance of Yosemite lay in the quality of its scenery—"the union of the deepest sublimity with the deepest beauty of nature"—not in any one scene or series of views, but in the whole.⁸ Although he noted the economic significance of such scenery, its benefit to public health and welfare concerned him most intensely. Olmsted was convinced that the "contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character" had lasting beneficial physical, mental, and moral effects, particularly if it occurred "in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits." Furthermore, he believed that such contemplation increased the subsequent capacity for happiness and that the lack of such opportunity could lead to depression and mental illness.⁹ What was it about natural scenery that accounted for such an effect? In its contemplation, he said, the mind was "occupied without purpose," producing an enjoyment of the moment, an escape from stresses of the present and worries about the future; it exercised and refreshed both mind and body. In his extended description of the values of natural scenery, Olmsted was describing the effect he believed it had upon himself. He frequently suffered nervous ailments of one sort or another, from which he found relief in "natural scenery," as opposed to "artificial pleasures" such as "theatres, parades, and promenades."¹⁰

Olmsted predicted that within a century millions of visitors would come to Yosemite each year and advised that precautions be taken to manage the landscape so that these visitors would cause the least damage, for "the slight harm which the few hundred visitors of this year might do, if no care were
taken to prevent it, would not be slight if it should be repeated by millions." Today Yosemite is one of the most popular national parks, with about 2.5 million visitors per year. It is also an urban park, serving the surrounding metropolitan regions of California and Nevada. Bumper-to-bumper traffic often clogs the road through the valley, and trucks haul out more than twenty tons of garbage per day. The air is polluted by car exhaust. Earth and plants along the main trails are pummeled and trampled by those who make the pilgrimage to Yosemite. Such are the conditions in other national parks, in Yellowstone, in Acadia, in landscapes like Niagara that have come to embody a cultural ideal of nature.

The question Olmsted posed in 1865 remains unresolved: how to admit all the visitors who wish to come without their destroying the very thing they value? The moment people come to a place, even as reverent observers, they alter what they came to experience. Preventing the destructive effects of human visitation requires management of water and soil, plants and animals, and people (and this is now routine at national parks and forests). Yet management is something most people don’t associate with wilderness; even the idea of management is anathema to some. This is because they see wilderness as something separate from humanity—as untouched by human labor and culture, on the one hand, and as a place where one’s behavior is free and unconstrained, on the other. Both ideas are problematic; both

Traffic congestion at Yosemite, 1980. (Courtesy Carl Steinitz, Department of Landscape Architecture, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University)