Biltmore entrance drive under construction, ca. 1890s. (Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)

Biltmore entrance drive. (Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)
to usage.” The Boston works, he said, would be “points to date from in the history of American landscape architecture, as much as Central Park. They will be the openings of new chapters of the art.”

Boston’s Fens and Riverway were built over nearly two decades (1880s–1890s) as an urban “wilderness,” the first attempt anywhere, so far as I know, to construct a wetland. These projects, built on the site of tidal flats and floodplains fouled by sewage and industrial effluent, were designed to purify water and protect adjacent land from flooding. They also incorporated an interceptor sewer, a parkway, and Boston’s first streetcar line; together, they formed a landscape system designed to accommodate the movement of people, the flow of water, and the removal of wastes. This skeleton of park, road, sewer, and public transit structured the growing city and its suburbs. The latter features were not part of the original park plan; Olmsted persuaded the city engineer to approve the construction of a tidal marsh instead of a concrete flood basin. He got the city to adopt a radical expansion of the project’s scope and concept.

Olmsted’s contemporaries knew full well that these parks were constructed, for they had seen and smelled the filthy, stinking, muddy mess the Fens replaced; the recognition of the transformation was part of their social meaning and aesthetic power. Today these works are admired, but are widely assumed to be preserved bits of “nature” in the city, rather than places that were designed and built, daring experiments of engineering, ecology, landscape design, and city planning.

The Fens and the Riverway yielded new knowledge and techniques, but not without trial and error. While Olmsted based his design upon a general understanding of natural processes of water movement—tides, currents, and flooding—and plant growth and succession, gained from experience with
The Fens and Boston, 1983. (Courtesy Alex S. MacLean/Landslides)
Constructing the Riverway, 1892. (Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)

The Riverway, 1920. (Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)