In employing natural and cultural processes as “co-workers,” Olmsted foresaw some results and failed to anticipate others. He successfully matched the form of the landscapes he designed to the rhythms of nonhuman processes and the spatial structure they created, and he planned within a frame of time and space appropriate to the processes involved. He sought common solutions to social and environmental problems by defining every project as comprehensively as possible, expanding its scope when necessary. But Olmsted was generally more skilled at taking account of physical and biological processes than at accounting for social and political processes. Time and again, his projects were destroyed or fundamentally altered because he failed to take such processes into account.76

Olmsted invented methods of practice, advanced the discipline of landscape architecture, and set a standard for professional conduct. He undertook risky innovation to advance the field, avoided short-term expedience in favor of long-term interests, and put public service before personal gain. But he also believed that professionals were a privileged elite whose expert opinions should not be questioned, and he failed to appreciate the power of popular culture to affect people’s attitudes toward his projects.

Olmsted’s legacy was double-edged; his ideas and the work that stemmed from them contained the seeds of both success and failure. Even as he established and expanded the influence of his profession, landscape architecture, in his own time, he planted the seeds of its invisibility. On the one hand, he understood physical and biological processes and applied that knowledge inventively. On the other, he disguised the artifice, so that ultimately the built landscapes were not recognized and valued as human constructs. He planted trees to look like “natural scenery” and then felt frustrated when people, accepting the scenery as “natural,” objected to cutting the trees he had planned to cull. His concealment of the art was so successful that it backfired. His notion of the social utility of natural scenery was lost; ultimately, it was viewed as decorative, not functional. Ironically, it was the “natural” appearance of his work that prevented people from appreciating how it fulfilled a broad range of functions.77

Landscapes blur the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Most people cannot distinguish between the parts of Biltmore Forest that merely grew and those that were planted, between the shores of Niagara that were shaped solely by river’s flow and plants’ growth and those planted to resemble them. Calling some landscapes “natural” and others “artificial” or “cultural” ignores the fact that landscapes are never wholly one or the other. Such thinking promotes the persistent, common conception of the city as a degraded environment and wilderness as a pristine place untainted by human presence. Seeing humans, ourselves, as solely or mainly a contaminating influence prevents us from appreciating the potential beneficial effects we might have and limits what we can imagine as possible.

Olmsted offers an example to emulate, not imitate. In reclaiming his legacy, we should do so selectively, learning from both his successes and his
failures, retaining those ideas that are still relevant and discarding others as relics. We may apply some of the principles upon which his work is based but not imitate the work itself; employ and celebrate the physical and biological processes that connect human and nonhuman nature but not always copy the outward appearance of natural features, not always try to conceal the design. We may embrace his notion of environmental benefits for all without adopting his belief that exposure to natural scenery will improve morals. And we may embrace his high standards for professional conduct while rejecting his notion of professional privilege.

Olmsted represented a middle ground—which eroded in the twentieth century—between John Muir’s idea of nature as “temple” and Gifford Pinchot’s idea of nature as “workshop.” To Muir a wilderness like Yosemite was sacred ground: “our holy Yosemite,” as he put it. Grazing the meadows and cutting the trees was sacrilege—plundering paradise. To Pinchot, Yosemite’s water and timber were material resources to be conserved and used. Olmsted could reconcile reverence and use, and he did this through art. He could speak of the sacred qualities of Yosemite, the “reverent mood” it evoked, yet still condone cutting and planting trees and shaping the scene, because he could envision future groves and glades still sublime. Like Olmsted, most designers believe that their work will make the world a better place, or at least improve some small part of it.

Failure to recognize the Fens and the Riverway as designed, as an artful, deliberate reconstruction of landscapes laid waste by human occupation, blinds us to the possibility of such transformations elsewhere. Recognition demands that renewal accompany use, that we not just abandon those places whose original appeal or value has been destroyed through human use but also take responsibility for creating life-sustaining habitats. Failure to acknowledge the constructedness of Niagara Falls and Yosemite conceals their connection to landscapes where the human is more dominant. Acknowledging the role of human ideas and purposes in constructing these landscapes forces us to clearly confront the human values we inevitably project upon such places. Demystifying the construction of these extraordinary places celebrates the human ability to shape them and promotes the possibility of fostering similar qualities in ordinary landscapes.

To deny the dynamic reality of the nonhuman world is also misleading and potentially destructive. Rain, rivers, mountains, trees, and birds are not just figments of human imagination; they exist. We perceive them only through our own human senses, refer to them by names we have given them, and employ them to tell our own stories, but they also have an existence outside that which we grant them. Failure to appreciate the dynamic, autonomous role of nonhuman features and phenomena promotes the illusion that humans can construct and control everything. Recognition prompts an understanding of human limitations, admits the possibility of unforeseen consequences, and recommends caution for undertakings so large in scale that unanticipated consequences might spell disaster.
All landscapes are constructed. Garden, forest, city, and wilderness are shaped by rivers and rain, plants and animals, human hands and minds. They are phenomena of nature and products of culture. There is always a tension in landscape between the reality and autonomy of the nonhuman and its cultural construction, between the human impulse to wonder at the wild and the compulsion to use, manage, and control. Landscapes of city and wilderness represent poles of a continuum in the history and intensity of human intervention. Seen thus, they bracket a range of environments, some destructive of life and some life-sustaining, some structured largely by human habitation, some a reminder that the human is only one possibility among many. For the world is not infinitely malleable; nature may be constructed, but it is not only a construction.