Perhaps more than any one else, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) affected the way America looks. He is best known as the creator of major urban parks, but across the nation, from the green spaces that help define our towns and cities, to suburban life, to protected wilderness areas, he left the imprint of his fertile mind and boundless energy. Out of his deep love for the land and his social commitment he fathered the profession of landscape architecture in America.

Olmsted’s unique contributions stemmed in part from the conjunction of strongly felt personal values and the needs of a young nation. America was experiencing unprecedented growth in the mid-19th century, making the transition from a rural people to a complex urban society. City life became more stressful as the crowds grew, the countryside was pushed into the distance. Olmsted saw the need for preserving green and open spaces where people could escape city pressures, places that nourished body and spirit. His understanding of the historical changes he was living through and his rare combination of idealism, artistry, intelligence, and practical knowledge enabled him to help soften the shocks of industrialization. Unable to separate his respect for the land from his belief in democracy, Olmsted saw parks as bastions of the democratic ideals of community and equality. He confronted a period of rapid mechanization and unabashed materialism with a natural sensibility and virtues of restraint and rural simplicity, values still represented in his parks.

Olmsted was a true Renaissance man whose many interests and ceaseless flow of ideas led him into experimental farming, writing and publishing, public health administration, preservation, and urban and regional planning. With other reformers, he pushed for protection of the Yosemite Valley. His 1864 report on the park was the first systematic justification for public protection of natural areas, emphasizing the duty of a democratic society to ensure that the “body of the people” have access to natural beauty.

In what he created and what he preserved for the future, Olmsted’s legacy is incalculable. The informal natural setting he made popular characterizes the American landscape. Beyond the dozens of city and state parks enjoyed by millions of people, Olmsted and his firm set the standard for hospital and institutional grounds, campuses, zoos, railway stations, parkways, private estates, and residential subdivisions across the country. Olmsted’s principles of democratic expansion and public access still guide and inspire urban planners. From the broadest concepts to the smallest details of his profession, the sign of Olmsted’s hand is everywhere in our lives.

Although Olmsted had no formal design training, he displayed a genius for creating landscapes both practical and beautiful. Ordinary, even desolate, spaces were often transformed into lush wildnesses and meadows complete with lakes, rustic furnishings and an intricate system of paths and drives. All this was accomplished under Olmsted’s direction with such skill and respect for nature that the viewer was frequently unaware of the metamorphosis which had taken place or of the idea behind the design.

Olmsted moved to Fairsted, his Brookline estate, in 1883 at the height of a long, active career. He was 60 years old and eager to settle with wife and children into his first permanent home. The surrounding neighborhood had once been described as “a kind of landscape garden.” At Fairsted, Olmsted was able to carve out a small piece of that garden, perfecting those design principles and ideas for which he had become famous. Nearly 200 different varieties of trees, shrubs and ground covers were planted on the grounds of Fairsted in order to create areas distinct in style and scenery. In 1886, a Chicago journalist took note of the property “In no Portion of the grounds is there any display of magnificence. Every shaded walk and every rocky nook shows but a careful oversight of nature’s own simple ways. It is a bit of nature’s magnificence, and human hands by seeking to embellish it with hothouse plants and marble figures and fountains of bronze cannot improve it.”

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Fairsted promised the “ideal suburban lifestyle,” combining the social and cultural advantages of the city with the restful and peaceful qualities of the country. The landscape has changed since Olmsted’s death in 1903 and is today being restored by the National Park Service to most closely reflect the late 1920s—a period with adequate documentation and one that marks the peak of the Olmsted design work. Dense planting of trees and an irregular “wave” of shrubs border the lawn at Fairsted, lending privacy to the setting while suggesting mystery and depth within. Spaciousness, another of Olmsted’s design principles, is achieved by using various shadings of green, indefinite boundaries, and a delicate interplay of light and color. A single elm, or clump of elms, was often planted on an Olmsted meadow landscape—a personal signature of the designer. It is easy to imagine Olmsted and his family admiring the shape and majesty of the Fairsted elm from within the pleasant confines of their conservatory or “out-of-door apartment.” This spectacular tree is a focal point for the contemplation of scenery yet does not draw attention from the landscape as a whole—something that might be true of a man made monument.

Olmsted’s true genius can be found in both his artistic skill and his ability to touch the heart and mind of the viewer. In describing his own response to beautiful scenery, Olmsted wrote: “Gradually and silently, the charm overcomes us; we know not exactly where or how.” The landscape of Fairsted, like the many others created by Olmsted, is a special place in which to observe, escape, unwind, and imagine.

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Olmsted’s main goal, no matter what he was doing was to attempt to improve American society. He had visions of vast recreational and cultural achievements in the hearts of cities. He did not see parks as just vast meadows, but rather he saw them as places of harmony—places where people would go to escape life and regain their sanity. He wanted these parks to be available to all people no matter what walk of life the person followed.

Olmsted sought to advance a feeling of communicativeness, which is a sense of shared community and dedicated service to the community among people. His concept of the role of the landscape architect was as broad as his social and political concerns. Olmsted saw his profession as a way to shape the American city by designing public parks and park systems to meet a wide range of recreational needs.

Olmsted had high expectations for his design’s psychology and visual effects on people. He believed that the perfect antidote to the stress and artificialness of urban life was a nice stroll through a pastoral park. He foresaw places with graceful undulating greensward and scattered growths of trees. He believed and promoted the idea that such an environment would promote a sense of tranquility. Olmsted’s vision was that the sense of calmness that would come from the park by his separation of the different landscape themes and conflicting uses.

Olmsted applied these principles of separation and subordination more consistently than any other landscape architect of his era. Subordination was accomplished in his parks where carefully constructed walks and paths would flow through landscape with gentle grades and easy curves, thus requiring the viewer’s minimal attention to the process of movement. At the same time, many of the structures that Olmsted incorporated into his parks merge with their surroundings. Separation is accomplished in his park systems by designing large parks that were meant for the enjoyment of the scenery. Smaller recreational areas for other activities and where “park ways” handle the movement of pedestrians and vehicular traffic offset these large parks.

As a designer, Olmsted drew upon the influences of American natural scenery. He also drew heavily on the social structure and value system of his native region. Another huge influence was Andrew Jackson Downing, (1815-1852) who was probably the greatest promoter of the “modern method of building,” which was rural improvement. Olmsted believed that the rural, picturesque landscape contrasted with and counteracted the confining and unhealthful conditions of the crowded urban environment and served to strengthen society by providing a place where all classes could mingle in contemplation and enjoyment of the pastoral experience. He sought to screen his “pleasure grounds” completely from the intrusions of daily life by screening them with thick plantings along their borders, separating and excluding commercial traffic, and discouraging all usage of the grounds which were not in harmony with this goal. He also strove to bring the landscape as close to as much of the urban population as possible, so that all could benefit from it.

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During the later half of the nineteenth century, cities in America underwent tremendous changes. More people were moving to the cities than ever before. It became evident that cities needed to be transformed into more hospitable places, and not just centers of commerce. No longer could the leaders of society or the city fathers sit back and watch the Cities operate. Towards the end of the 1850s city beautification became an issue that more and more leaders followed and explored. The theory behind this movement was that the more aesthetically pleasing you make a city, the more people will want to live in that city, and the happier they will be.

One of the greatest champions of the City Beautiful movement was Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted was the leading landscape architect of the post-Civil War generation, and has long been acknowledged as the founder of American landscape architecture.

Frederick Law Olmsted was born in Hartford, Connecticut. He was raised as a gentleman, and while he never fully attended college, he did become a very learned man. When he was 18 years old, Olmsted moved to New York to begin a career as a scientific farmer. Soon after that career failed to take off, he toured Europe with his brother, served as a merchant seaman, and traveled throughout the southern United States as a newspaper correspondent, publishing several books as an outgrowth of that career.

Through several connections gained as a columnist with the New Yorker, Olmsted was able to gain the appointment as the Superintendent of Central Park, New York City, in 1857, early in the development of that park project. He soon met Calvert Vaux, who had been working on a design for the park with Andrew Jackson Downing. When Downing died, Vaux approached Olmsted about collaborating on the project. Their plan, titled Greensward, was selected as the winning design.

In 1859, Olmsted married the widow of his brother, John, and he adopted her children. In 1861, Olmsted obtained a leave of absence from his duties at Central Park so that he could serve as the Executive Secretary (the head of administration) of United States Sanitary Commission, an early version of the Red Cross, which was responsible for aiding the well being of the soldiers of the Union Army during the Civil War. In 1865, he was offered the position manager at the Mariposa Estate in California, a gold mining venture north of San Francisco, and he left the organization. He later returned to New York when the project failed, joining Vaux in designing Prospect Park (1865-1873), Chicago’s Riverside subdivision, Buffalo’s park system (1868-1876), and the Niagara Reservation at Niagara Falls (1887).

In 1883, he departed New York City and relocated to Brookline, Massachusetts with his practice. Olmsted had begun work on a park system for the City of Boston; eventually he focused much of his time on the Emerald Necklace. This along with his work on the design of the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago was among the last of Olmsted’s projects. In 1895, due to failing health Olmsted turned the firm over to his partners, and soon senility forced him to be confined in the McLean Hospital at Waverly, Massachusetts. Ironically, Olmsted had designed the grounds of the institution.

Frederick Law Olmsted died on August 28, 1903. His sons and their successors continued the landscape architecture firm he founded until 1980. Subsequently, his home and office were purchased by the National Park Service and opened to the public as museum. His papers are now housed in the Library of Congress, while the Olmsted National Historic site preserves the drawings and plans for much of Olmsted and his firm’s body of work.
The Emerald Necklace

The Necklace is one of the boldest and most complex undertakings of Olmsted’s career and is perhaps his most influential design. His increasing involvement in the project from its inception in the mid-1870s was a major factor in Olmsted’s decision to move from New York to Boston.

Completed near the end of the century, the 5-mile stretch of linked parks, ponds, and parkways was a brilliant combination of comprehensive planning, technical engineering, and design.

Olmsted spent much of his career working out the interdependent relationship he felt should exist between city and country. Many of his finest principles of urban planning were realized in the Boston Park System. A variety of landscapes were woven into the fabric of the city, from the saltwater marshes of the Back Bay Fens to the sheep meadows of Franklin Park. Olmsted anticipated many different uses for parkland, including in this greenbelt both large and small spaces, intimate glades along riverbanks, dense wilderness, open water, and a convenient system of trails and drives.

Stretching from the Boston Common downtown to the Arnold Arboretum and Franklin Park in Roslindale and Roxbury, the Emerald Necklace is one of the oldest series of public parks and parkways in the country.

His vision for the landscape is best expressed in an 1881 report to the Boston park Commission. The Back Bay Fens was a sewage fouled tidal creek and swamp that often flooded. Olmsted’s plan simultaneously solved the drainage and health problems and turned the surrounding area into “scenery of a winding, brackish creek, within wooded banks; gaining interest from the meandering course of the water”. Muddy River would be “a fresh-water course bordered by passages of rushy meadow, trees in groups, diversified by thickets and open glades”. The largest body of water in the system, Jamaica Pond, formed a “natural sheet of water, shadowed by fine natural forest growth, darkening the water’s edge and favoring great beauty in reflections and flickering half-lights”. The Arrenum offered “eminences commanding distant prospects, in one direction seaward over the city, in the other across to the blue distant hills”. Visitors could seek a “complete escape from town” in Franklin Park. Olmsted envisioned a “lovely ale gently winding between low wooded slopes, giving a broad expanse of unbroken turf, lost in the distance.” It all formed “a grand parkway of picturesque type...reaching from the heart of the city into the rural scenery of the suburbs”.

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