



## FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED: PLANS AND VIEWS OF COMMUNITIES AND PRIVATE ESTATES

Edited by Charles E. Beveridge, Lauren Meier, and Irene Mills

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**Review by:** Nat Case (he/him), INCase, LLC

A REFERENCE VOLUME that will presumably never be duplicated, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Plans and Views of Communities and Private Estates* should be recognized as essential reading for those whose interests include American landscape architecture. It is the most recently published part of a comprehensive, multi-volume collection of the writings and works of the man who, for all practical purposes, established landscape architecture as a serious intellectual field. This volume contains plans for seventy non-park projects that Olmsted either designed himself or had an authorial hand in. Landmark campuses like those of Stanford University and the University of California; public spaces like the National Zoo; private estates, exemplified by the 195 square mile (510 square kilometer) Biltmore Estate in North Carolina; and pioneering planned communities like Riverside, Illinois, are all included. Other volumes in the series collect plans, views, and writings on Olmsted's many other projects.

The superb print quality and the generous eleven-by-eleven-inch pages give ample room to see the shape of Olmsted's vision. The high quality of the reproductions means that even though they are nearly all substantially reduced in size, the reader still can still get an excellent sense of their texture and graphic quality. As a cartographer, I was sorry not to see more detail, or any discussion of the plans as graphic works, but this is consistent with the editorial direction of the book, directing our attention to the ideas the plans embody, and the intellectual thrust that the works represent. The plans Olmsted drew for any particular project were the means to an end, tools to both

create both the physical spaces and enact his humane vision of humans in those spaces, rather than artworks in themselves. This book keeps its focus on those ends and on the processes Olmsted used to reach them, whether they were ultimately realized or not. The text, though generally brief, gives attention to his ongoing negotiations amongst his own visions, the vision of his fellow designers, wishes of his clients, and conditions on the ground revealed during construction.

Most of the projects in this volume are illustrated with multiple images. Original plans are often accompanied by photographs, of both freshly-planted landscapes and of later conditions with more mature growth. This allows the reader to better understand the three-dimensional spaces Olmsted was envisioning: a landscape vision that was meant to be experienced by walking *through* the landscape rather than being picturesque, viewed from a particular set of vantage points. Because of this, the typical plans for his landscape designs are misleadingly two-dimensional. He also sometimes used drawn views as tools to play with the spaces in his mind's eye, and to communicate his conceptions to both clients and to the construction teams. The working diagrams are specific in the ways a construction crew would need—plant this species here, regrade the land there to this measurement, build a stone wall just so—and the views are a necessary part of communication to the client and to others on the team, as the visual impression of the landscape design is its essential point. It is in the sketches, though, that the integration of the often sizable elements from other hands is negotiated: showing how,



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say, a very large house is made to look to be an organic part of the landscape. It is also interesting to see how, in many cases, he entirely cedes to the architects working on the buildings themselves the realization of their own visions, simply putting a placeholder “building here” marker on the plan. Perhaps this relationship of simultaneously standing up for his own design autonomy and vision while seeking to be collaborative with presumably strong-willed building architect colleagues plays out more explicitly in the text portion of his papers, but you can see hints of it in the interpretive texts in this volume discussing some of his large projects, where the relationship between buildings and grounds is more complex.

One thing that is simply taken for granted in the text, and in his work, is the social and economic class of his clientele. While his artistic vision was universal in scope and his moral vision throughout his career was vigorously egalitarian, in practice his clients were some of the wealthiest men of his time. Unlike his work on urban parks—which in his vision needed to be open to the general public, an idea he defended with great energy over his career—he never really worked on housing for a modern, working-class audience. This reality can cast suspicion on, for example, the motives behind some of the social engineering aspects of his residential developments. His one “village” plan, for the town built to support George Vanderbilt’s vast Biltmore estate, is a throwback: a feudal village adjacent to the great castle on the hill. His forays into town planning were suburbs meant for an upper-middle-class clientele, with Riverside, Illinois being the most prominent example. He often expressed a desire for more green space, and for views that changed as you walked down the street—foreshadowing much of modern suburban design—but most of his work was not embedded in the harsh realities of housing for the droves of immigrants and freed slaves who found themselves in the sort of horrific living conditions Jacob Riis documented in *How the Other Half Lives* in 1890. Olmsted decried those conditions—and his parks were meant as capsules of natural beauty and peace created for the relief of city-dwellers—but actual working-class living conditions were not, ultimately, within his professional purview.

One theme running through this book, and Olmsted’s work in general, is the importance of paying close attention to the nature (in multiple senses) of the place itself, as it existed before landscaping and as it existed in a Platonic ideal in Olmsted’s mind, rather than simply imposing the owners’ desires and needs on the land. The book’s text makes this point repeatedly and it is best illustrated by Olmsted’s final great project, the design of the grounds at Biltmore. Olmsted wanted Biltmore to be a global showplace for his ideas, and the book takes sixty-five pages to work its way through them: they include a model of modern managed forestry (where the first dedicated forestry school in the United States was founded), an arboretum with a comprehensive specimen collection, and grand vistas of and from the house itself (still the largest private residence in the nation). Olmsted found much of the land there overworked and depleted, and his vision of restoration, while it does not entirely coincide with today’s ecological sensibilities, was in contrast to the visions of landscape he found himself arguing against, involving heavily artificial gardens and intensive use of the land without much regard to its underlying health. On one hand, he was interested in creating a visual effect appropriate to the specific context, but on the other, he was aware of, and interested in, the long-term effect his ideas and example would have in the world. It is a striking and subtle combination which you can see played out in a variety of ways over his career, even in this subset of “other projects” besides the urban parks for which he is best known.

This volume is meant to stand alongside Olmsted’s collected papers and the other supplementary volumes showing his work. As a single part of a series, it sometimes seems to miss, or take for granted, information that is presumably available in its companion works. For example, while it references discussions Olmsted had with clients and colleagues, it doesn’t feel the need to spell those out in detail. So, while I would recommend *Frederick Law Olmsted: Plans and Views of Communities and Private Estates* as a worthwhile purchase by itself, I would also recommend libraries consider purchasing the full series to give readers a more comprehensive picture of the Olmsted’s works and ideas.

