

*This book is dedicated to landscape architects, students, and instructors everywhere who are too often relegated to secondary status—"yes, some trees would be nice out back, if they don't cost too much." And for those architects who think this is as it should be: Consider what Frederick Law Olmsted had to say and, depending, take heart or take stock.*

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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

It is no exaggeration to say that Frederick Law Olmsted is the best-known and most revered landscape architect in United States history. But he was much more than that. Well regarded for five books based on his travels through England and the American South and Southwest that were published from 1852 to 1861, for his many newspaper and journal essays, and his association with Putnam's Magazine, Olmsted was a high-profile public intellectual and man of letters well before he turned forty.

As if this were not enough, in April 1858 he and Calvert Vaux won the competition to design New York City's Central Park, and slowly but not quite surely, Olmsted became a landscape gardener (the term he preferred to "landscape architect"). Two other careers intervened—more on this in the introduction—before he and Vaux entered into a second collaboration, late in 1865, to design Prospect Park in the still-independent city of Brooklyn. There was now no going back. Despite many other interests, he was from then on, first, foremost, and forever, a landscape gardener.

The firm of "Olmsted, Vaux, & Company" was dissolved in October 1872, although the two men remained on good terms, their professional paths occasionally crossing, until Vaux died

*The People's Park at Birkenhead*  
(1851)

*From April into October 1850, Olmsted took a "sabbatical" from his Staten Island farm to tour parts of England (and bits of Wales and Scotland), much of the time on foot, with his brother John Hull Olmsted and friend Charles Loring Brace. Studying agricultural practices, observing desperate poverty firsthand but also visiting museums and, through family connections, homes of the socially well placed, Olmsted was deeply moved by the graceful beauty of England's rural landscapes as well as the orderly cleanliness of its farms and villages, certainly in comparison with what he knew from home. But what struck him most was Birkenhead Park, the first public recreation ground he had ever seen, leading him later in his tour to visit others in Chester and London. His enthusiasm was almost unrestrained: "Is it not a grand good thing," he writes in this, his very first essay on a park, that Birkenhead "is entirely, unreservedly, and forever the People's own"? Olmsted drew two important conclusions from his English excursion: that he would join the ranks of Andrew Jackson Downing and others urging the creation of municipal recreation grounds in the United States, and that publicly owned parks were socially more beneficial than those held privately, even when opened to the populace.*

*Originally published as "The People's Park at Birkenhead, near Liverpool, by W., Staten Island, New York," The Horticulturist, 6*

(May 1851), and in longer form in *Olmsted's Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, 2 vols. (1852). "W" stood for "Wayfarer," *Olmsted's occasional pen name early in his career.*

Birkenhead is the most important suburb of Liverpool, having the same relation to it that Brooklyn has to New-York, or Charlestown to Boston. When the first line of Liverpool packets was established, there were not half a dozen houses here; it now has a population of many thousands, and is increasing with a rapidity hardly paralleled in the New World. This is much owing to the very liberal and enterprising management of the land-owners, which affords an example worthy of consideration in the vicinity of many of our own large towns. There are several public squares, and the streets and places are broad, and well paved and lighted. A considerable part of the town has been built with uniformity, and a reference to general effect, from the plans, and under the direction of a talented architect, Gillespie Graham, Esq., of Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup>

We received this information while crossing the Mersey in a ferryboat, from a fellow passenger, who, though a stranger, entered into conversation, and answered our inquiries, with frankness and courtesy. Near the landing we found, by his direction, a square of eight or ten acres, enclosed by an iron fence, and laid out with tasteful masses of shrubbery (not trees), and gravel walks. The houses about were detached, and though of the same general style, were sufficiently varied in details not to appear monotonous. These were all of stone.

We had left this, and were walking up a long, broad street, when the gentleman who had crossed the ferry with us, joined us again, and said that as we were strangers, we might like to look at the ruins of an abbey which were in the vicinity, and he

had come after us; that if we pleased he might conduct us to it. What an odd way these Englishmen have of being "gruff and reserved to strangers," thought I.

Did you ever hear of Birkenhead Abbey?<sup>2</sup> I never had before. It has no celebrity, but coming upon it so fresh from the land of Youth as we did, so unexpecting of anything of the kind—though I have since seen far older ruins, and more renowned, I have never found anything so impressively aged.

At the Market place we went into a baker's shop, and while eating some buns, learned that the poorest flour in the market was American, and the best, French. French and English flour is sold in sacks, American in barrels. The baker asked us if American flour was *kiln dried*, and thought it must be greatly injured, if it was not, on that account. When we left, he obligingly directed us to several objects of interest in the vicinity, and showed us through the market. The building is very large, convenient, and fine. The roof, which is mostly of glass, is high and airy, and is supported by two rows of slender iron columns, giving to the interior the appearance of three light and elegant arcades. The contrivances to effect ventilation and cleanliness are very complete. It was built by the town, upon land given to it for the purpose, and cost \$175,000.

The baker had begged of us not to leave Birkenhead without seeing their new Park, and at his suggestion we left our knapsacks with him, and proceeded to it. As we approached the entrance, we were met by women and girls, who, holding out a cup of milk, asked us—"Will you take a cup of milk, sirs! Good, cool, sweet, cow's milk, gentlemen, or right warm from the ass." And at the gate were a herd of donkeys, some with cans of milk strapped to them, others saddled and bridled, to be let for ladies and children to ride.

The gateway, which is about a mile and a half from the ferry, and quite back of the town, is a great massive block of handsome Ionic architecture, standing alone, and unsupported by anything else in the vicinity, and looking, as I think, heavy and awkward. There is a sort of grandeur about it that the English are fond of, but which, when it is entirely separate from all other architectural constructions, always strikes me unpleasantly. It seems intended as an impressive preface to a great display of art within. But here, as well as at Eaton Park,<sup>3</sup> and other places I have since seen, it is not followed up with great things—the grounds immediately within the grand entrance being very simple, and apparently rather overlooked by the gardener. There is a large archway for carriages, and two smaller ones for those on foot; on either side, and over these, are rooms, which probably serve as inconvenient lodges for the laborers. No porter appears, and the gates are freely open to the public.

Walking a short distance up an avenue, we passed through another light iron gate into a thick, luxuriant, and diversified garden. Five minutes of admiration, and a few more spent in studying the manner in which art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty, and I was ready to admit that in democratic America, there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People's Garden. Indeed, I was satisfied that gardening had here reached a perfection that I had never before dreamed of. I cannot attempt to describe the effect of so much taste and skill as had evidently been employed; I will only tell you, that we passed through winding paths, over acres and acres, with a constant varying surface, where on all sides were growing every variety of shrubs and flowers, with more than natural grace, all set in borders of greenest, closest turf, and all kept with most consummate neatness. At a distance of a quarter of a mile from the gate, we came to an open field

of clean, bright, green-sward, closely mown, on which a large tent was pitched, and a party of boys in one part, and a party of gentlemen in another, were playing cricket. Beyond this was a large meadow with rich groups of trees, under which a flock of sheep were reposing, and girls and women with children were playing. While watching the cricketers, we were threatened with a shower, and hastened back to look for shelter, which we found in a pagoda, on an island approached by a Chinese bridge. It was soon filled, as were the other ornamental buildings, by a crowd of those who, like ourselves, had been overtaken in the grounds by the rain; and I was glad to observe that the privileges of the garden were enjoyed about equally by all classes. There were some who even were attended by servants, and sent at once for their carriages, but a large proportion were of the common ranks, and a few women with children, or suffering from ill health, were evidently the wives of very humble laborers. There were a number of strangers, and some we observed with note-books, that seemed to have come from a distance to study from the garden. The summer-houses, lodges, bridges, &c., were all well constructed, and of undecaying materials. One of the bridges which we crossed was of our countryman, Remington's patent, an extremely light and graceful erection.<sup>4</sup>

I obtained most of the following information from the head working gardener.

The site of the Park and Garden was ten years ago, a flat, sterile, clay farm. It was placed in the hands of Mr. Paxton<sup>5</sup> in June, 1844, by whom it was laid out in its present form by June of the following year. Carriage roads, thirty-four feet wide, with borders of ten feet, and walks varying in width, were first drawn and made. The excavation for a pond was also made, and the earth obtained from these sources used for making mounds and to vary the surface, which has been done with much *naturalness*

and taste. The whole ground was thoroughly under-drained, the minor drains of stone, the main, of tile. By these sufficient water is obtained to fully supply the pond, or lake, as they call it, which is from twenty to forty feet wide, and about three feet deep, and meanders for a long distance through the garden. It is stocked with aquatic plants, gold fish and swans.

The roads are McAdamized.<sup>6</sup> On each side of the carriage way, and of all the walks, pipes for drainage are laid, which communicate with deep main drains that run under the edge of all the mounds or flower beds. The walks are laid first with six inches of fine broken stone, then three inches cinders, and the surface with six inches of fine rolled gravel. All the stones on the ground which were not used for these purposes, were laid in masses of rock-work, and mosses and rock-plants attached to them. The mounds were then planted with shrubs, and Heaths, and Ferns, and the beds with flowering plants. Between these, and the walks and drives, is everywhere a belt of turf, which, by the way, is kept close cut with short, broad scythes and shears, and swept with house-brooms, as we saw. Then the rural lodges, temple, pavilion, bridges, orchestra for a band of instrumental music, &c., were built. And so, in one year, the skeleton of this delightful garden was complete.

But this is but a small part. Besides the cricket and an archery ground, large valleys were made verdant, extensive drives arranged—plantations, clumps, and avenues of trees formed, and a large park laid out. And all this magnificent pleasure-ground is entirely, unreservedly, and forever the People's own. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts, as the British Queen. More than that, the Baker of Birkenhead had the pride of an Owner in it.

Is it not a grand good thing? But you are inquiring who *paid* for it. The honest owners—the most wise and worthy town's people of Birkenhead—in the same way that the New-Yorkers

pay for the Tombs,<sup>7</sup> and the Hospital, and the *cleaning* (as they amusingly say) of their streets.

Of the farm which was purchased, one hundred and twenty acres have been disposed of in the way I have described. The remaining sixty acres, encircling the Park and Garden, were reserved to be sold or rented, after being well graded, streeed and planted, for private building lots. Several fine mansions are already built on these (having private entrances to the park) and the rest now sell at \$1.25 a square yard. The whole concern cost the town between five and six hundred thousand dollars. It gives employment at present, to ten gardeners and laborers in summer, and to five in winter.

The generous spirit and fearless enterprise, that has accomplished this, has not been otherwise forgetful of the health and comfort of the poor. Among other things, I remember, a public wash and bathing house for the town is provided. I should have mentioned also, in connection with the market, that in the outskirts of the town there is a range of stone slaughter-houses, with stables, yards, pens, supplies of hot and cold water, and other arrangements and conveniences, that enlightened regard for health and decency would suggest.

The consequence of all these sorts of things is, that all about, the town lands, which a few years ago were almost worthless wastes, have become of priceless value; where no sound was heard but the bleating of goats and braying of asses, complaining of their pasturage, there is now the hasty click and clatter of many hundred busy trowels and hammers. You may drive through wide and thronged streets of stately edifices, where were only a few scattered huts, surrounded by quagmires. Docks of unequalled size and grandeur are building, and a forest of masts grows along the shore; and there is no doubt that this young town is to be not only remarkable as a most agreeable and healthy place of residence, but that it will soon be distin-

guished for extensive and profitable commerce. It seems to me to be the only town I ever saw that has been really built at all in accordance with the advanced science, taste, and enterprising spirit that are supposed to distinguish the nineteenth century. I do not doubt it might be found to have plenty of exceptions to its general character, but I did not inquire for these, nor did I happen to observe them. Certainly, in what I have noticed, it is a model town, and may be held up as an example, not only to philanthropists and men of taste, but to speculators and men of business.

After leaving the Park, we ascended a hill, from the top of which we had a fine view of Liverpool and Birkenhead. Its sides were covered with villas, with little gardens about them. The architecture was generally less fantastic, and the style and materials of building more substantial than is usually employed in the same class of residences with us. Yet there was a good deal of the same *stuck up*, and uneasy pretentious air about them, that the suburban houses of our own city people so commonly have. Possibly this is the effect of association in my mind, of steady, reliable worth and friendship with plain or old fashioned dwellings, for I often find it difficult to discover in the buildings themselves, the elements of such expression. I am inclined to think it is more generally owing to some disunity in the design—often perhaps to a want of keeping between the mansion and its grounds or its situation. The architect and the gardener do not understand each other, and commonly the owner or resident is totally at variance in his tastes and intentions from both; or the man whose ideas the plan is made to serve, or who pays for it, has no true independent taste, but had fancies to be accommodated, which only follow confusedly after custom or fashion. It is a pity that every man's house cannot be really his own, and that he cannot make all that is true, beautiful, and good, in his own character, tastes, pursuits and

history, manifest in it. But however fanciful and uncomfortable many of the villa houses about Liverpool and Birkenhead appear at first sight, the substantial and thorough manner in which most of them are built, will atone for many faults. The friendship of nature has been secured to them. Dampness, heat, cold will be welcome to do their best. Every day they will improve. In fifty or a hundred years, fashions may change, and they will appear, perhaps, quaint, possibly grotesque—at any rate, picturesque—but still strong, homelike, and hospitable. They have no shingles to rot, no glued, and puttied, and painted gim-crackery, to warp and crack, and molder, and can never look so shabby, and desolate, and dreary, as will nine-tenths of the buildings of the same denomination now erecting about New-York, almost as soon as they lose the raw, cheerless, impostor-like airs which seem almost inseparable from their newness.

## NOTES

1. James Gillespie Graham (1776–1855), a Scottish architect, designed the town of Birkenhead, located on the River Mersey, from 1825 to 1828.
2. Birkenhead Abbey was erected ca. 1250 for the Catholic Order of Benedict.
3. Eaton Park with its hall in Chester, England, was originally owned by the duke of Westminster.
4. Olmsted refers to John R. Remington (1817–53) who patented improvements for truss bridges.
5. Sir Joseph Paxton (1803–65), English landscape designer and architect, is best known for his Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, built for the Great (International) Exhibition of 1851.
6. John Loudon McAdam (1756–1836), Scottish engineer and road builder, improved drainage of thoroughfares by laying crushed stone mixed with gravel over a bed of larger stones. Others would later add tar to bind the materials.

7. The Tombs, a New York City prison, so called because its façade was based on an Egyptian mausoleum, was built from 1835 to 1838 according to plans by John Haviland (1792–1852). Olmsted may be referring to the New York City Lunatic Asylum (later Metropolitan Hospital), designed by Alexander Jackson Davis (1803–1892) in 1834–35.

## TWO

## *The Phalanstery and the Phalansterians* (1852)

*The North American Phalanx in Colt Necks Township, New Jersey, was a secular utopian community founded in 1841 upon the ideas of Frenchman Charles Fourier (1772–1837), who argued that cooperative living was more personally satisfying and economically productive than private enterprise. Cooperation would best be achieved, he believed, in somewhat isolated settlements called phalanxes in which approximately 1,600 people—the “associated”—would live in “grand hotels,” or “phalansteries,” sharing domestic chores while laboring together to generate income. The number of residents in the North American Phalanx never exceeded 150, and most were middle- and working-class Northeasterners. Disputes over the women’s rights and abolitionist movements, a proposal to consider religious affiliation, and a costly 1854 fire brought the experiment to an end that year.*

*Olmsted was favorably enough impressed by what he saw to make the remarkable statement that if he had a sixteen-year-old son, he would prefer him to spend “the next four years of his life as a working member of the North American Phalanx than at Yale or Harvard” provided—and this was a big “provided” for Olmsted—the boy was studious and well informed, for his major reservation about the “associated” was their insufficient “attention to the intellectual” life.*