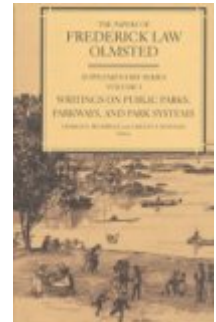


Charles E. Beveridge, Carolyn F. Hoffman, eds.. *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Supplementary Series*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. xxiv + 643 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5532-0.



Reviewed by David Scobey

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The past two decades have witnessed a veritable cottage industry in research on Frederick Law Olmsted, including several estimable biographies and detailed studies of his social thought, design practice, and landscape works.[1] Without a doubt, the engine of the Olmsted boom has been the serial publication of *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, a project sponsored by the American University under the editorship of Charles E. Beveridge. The volume under review is the seventh of a projected twelve volumes in the series, aimed at offering a comprehensive selection of Olmsted's professional, public, and personal papers. By now it is clear that the series represents an extraordinary cumulative achievement, one that combines intelligent editorial judgment, incisive analysis, a copious but transparent apparatus, and handsome production values. *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted* sets a benchmark for scholarly rigor and usability in published documentary collections.

Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems represents no exception. As with earlier volumes, an extended "Introduction" helpfully il-

luminates the articles, lectures, annual reports, and administrative papers assembled here; and the documents are further contextualized with plans, illustrations, and thorough notes. Unlike previous volumes, however, the organizing principle is thematic rather than chronological. The volume brings together four decades of theoretical, polemical, and administrative writings on the core strand of Olmsted's professional work, urban park design. (One further thematic volume, a large-format collection of plans and views, is also projected by the series editors.) As a result, *Writings on Public Parks...* necessarily lacks some of the topical variety and biographical texture that made earlier volumes of the *Papers* valuable. Yet it offers an intensive look at the development of Olmsted's views on landscape design and park administration over the course of his career.

To a great extent, the themes of the volume will be familiar to students of 19th century planning, urbanism, and design. The speeches, pamphlets, and annual reports confirm scholars' arguments that Olmsted privileged pastoral scenery—broad sweeps of greensward framed by trees, wa-

ter, and other compositional elements-as the defining element of an urban parkscape. The writings underscore the "recreative" function that such scenery was designed to perform: the offering of tranquility and decorous sociability to counteract "the highly elaborate, sophisticated and artificial conditions of...ordinary civilized life," as Olmsted told a Brooklyn audience in 1868 (152). The volume traces Olmsted's expansion of this therapeutic program from single parks to parkway extensions to metropolitan systems in Brooklyn, Buffalo, Boston, and elsewhere. Finally it includes several administrative reports on the enforcement of proper demeanor in public parks-documents that meld Olmsted's genuine commitment to democratic fellowship with his equally heartfelt belief in class-based tutelage of the urban masses.[2]

If these themes-the therapeutics of pastoral design, the shift from parkscape to cityscape, and the class politics of public administration-are familiar from recent research, the volume contains other surprises. The sheer range of cities and sites about which Olmsted wrote is impressive; even more so is the flexibility with which he responded to their ecology and topography, sometimes at the expense of his own design canons. Olmsted could be famously stubborn in dealing with other human beings whose views on park design diverged from his own, but he listened wonderfully to the landscape itself. His report to Chicago's South Park Commission, for instance, compares the lakeshore wetland to a Southern mangrove swamp to argue for making Jackson Park a lagoon-based boating park rather than the sort of greensward he typically favored (213). One comes away impressed by the analytical suppleness and creativity of Olmsted's encounters with terrain, soil, and water.

Writing on Public Parks...is equally striking for what it shows about the links between design and print culture in nineteenth century America. Olmsted's ventures into magazine publishing dur-

ing the 1850s and 1860s are well known (and well-documented in Volumes II and V of this series). What the current volume makes clear is the persistence with which he sought to mobilize public opinion at a time when design and taste-making were becoming core concerns of genteel public culture. The range of discursive interventions represented in this volume is impressive, from plans and administrative reports to lectures and articles to tactical lobbying of local notables. Particularly interesting is the extent of self-publishing that Olmsted did, issuing pamphlets drawn from his reports and lectures for small, strategically placed constituencies in the cities where he worked.

Such literary activism marks a significant chapter in the history of the bourgeois public sphere in America; it signals the interconnection between elite opinion-making and the tutelary discourse of design. Leora Auslander has argued that such a link was central to the development of French national culture in the nineteenth century; a new cadre of aesthetic experts, she argues, disciplined consumer habits and class relations in post-Revolutionary France through the circulation of canons of "taste." Olmsted's mentor Andrew Jackson Downing played the same role in the antebellum United States, braiding together influential commissions, literary journalism, and advocacy of public design in a single circuit of national taste-making. With the Olmsted of this volume, the link between print culture, professional practice, and political activism reaches full maturity. The reports, lectures, pamphlets, and theoretical disquisitions gathered here trace the emergence of the designer as public intellectual: self-commissioned to write as well as draw, to cultivate both parkland and public opinion.[3]

To a great extent, this story of the designer's claim to public authority in and over democratic society-the prehistory of Wright, Mumford, and Venturi, so to speak-remains to be written. It is linked to, but different from, the more familiar tale of the professionalization of design. The ma-

terials gathered in Writings on Public Parks...will help us to tell it.

Notes

[1]. For biographies of Olmsted, see especially Laurel Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmstead* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); and Melvin Kalfus, *Frederick Law Olmstead: The Passion of a Public Artist* (New York: New York University Press, 1990). Important studies of Olmsted's social thought, public influence, and design practice include Charles E. Beveridge, *Frederick Law Olmstead: Designing the American Landscape* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995); Geoffrey Blodgett, "Landscape Architecture As Conservative Reform," *Journal of American History* 62 (March, 1976) 869-89; and Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmstead and America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Scribner, 1999). For studies of particular works by Olmsted, Vaux, and other collaborators, see for instance Cynthia Zaivetsky, *Frederick Law Olmstead and the Boston Park System* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); and Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[2]. For influential readings of Olmsted's landscape theories, see Beveridge, *Frederick Law Olmstead*, and Rybczynski, *Clearing in the Distance*. For the evolution of Olmsted's work from parks to parkway neighborhoods and urban park systems, see David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). For the class politics of Victorian park design, see Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *Park and the People*, and Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York Cityscape, 1850-1890* (forthcoming, Temple University Press).

[3]. See Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and David Schuyler, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing,*

1815-1852 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). My argument here draws on the efforts of historians to engage Jurgen Habermas' account of the bourgeois public sphere with nineteenth-century politics and culture; see especially Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

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