

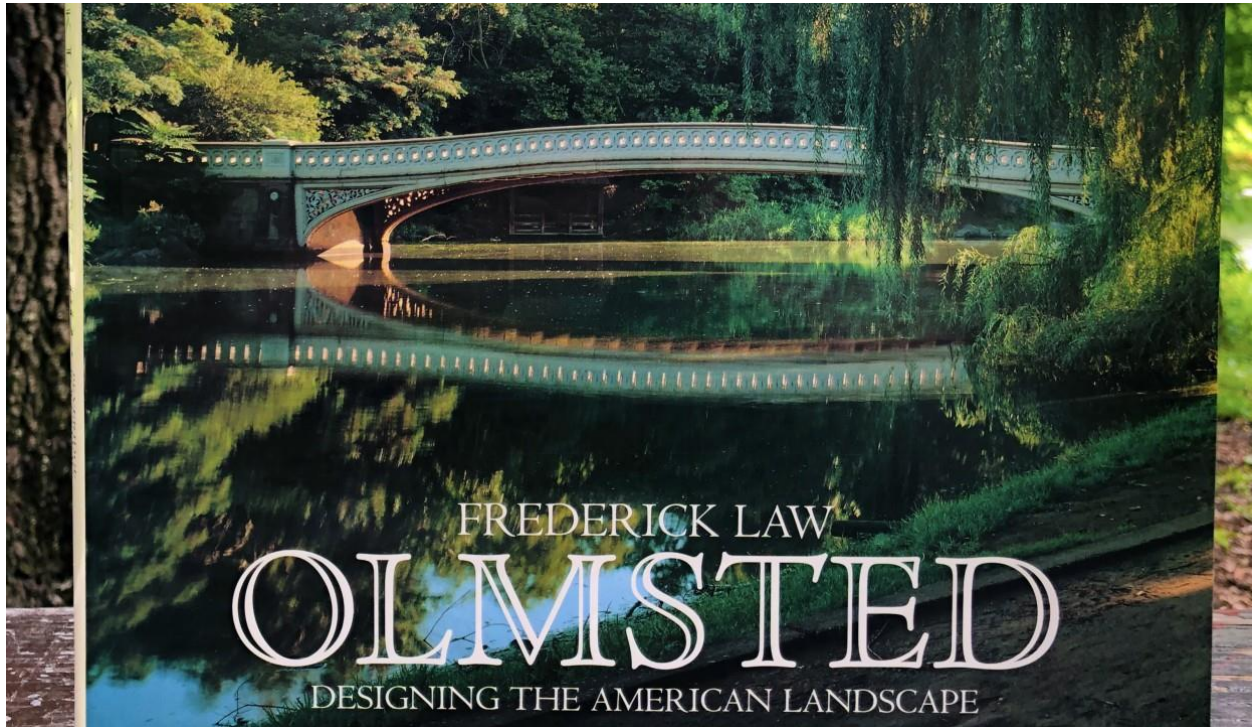
More Than Ever, We Need Frederick Law Olmsted! (a birthday note)

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April is World Landscape Architecture Month—a month that perhaps not coincidentally includes the birthday of Frederick Law Olmsted. Born on April 26 in 1822, Olmsted is generally regarded as the founder of American Landscape Architecture. While not everyone outside the [landscape architecture](#) profession knows his name, most know his work: [Central Park](#) in New York City, [Prospect Park](#) in Brooklyn, [Piedmont Park](#) in Atlanta. His son (FLO Jr.) continued the practice into the 1950's and designed the original [Bok Tower Gardens](#) here in Central Florida. I believe that the ideas and ideals that Olmsted expressed through his work are needed today more than ever before, particularly in today's world of political and cultural division and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Focus on Re-Creation and Reverence

What I feel may be less well understood is Olmsted's role as a social reformer as expressed through his work. I would like to discuss this from two perspectives: (1) Olmsted believed deeply in the idea of Re-Creation of the mind and spirit through interactions with nature; (2) Olmsted also believed deeply in a sense of Reverence for nature and for our fellow man. I would like to discuss these ideas together, as a linked ethos that I believe is re-emerging in our towns today as we struggle with COVID-19-related isolation and perhaps the rediscovery of simple pleasures such as quiet walks and friendly (distanced) conversation with neighbors and strangers alike.

The late 1800's was a time of rapid industrialization in the North and Midwest and of Reconstruction in the South. Class distinctions and workers' rights were becoming volatile touchstones during the industrial revolution, which was also creating a physical transformation of cities into economically vibrant, but polluted and unsafe places for people. The South was rebuilding not only their cities, but also reconciling the new social order of emancipation and racial change. Olmsted (a staunch Abolitionist) was deeply interested in the inefficiency of the slave states, the lack of a functional middle class, and the poverty and inequity found in both the white and black communities.

Olmsted believed that parks were necessary places for escape from the noise and ills of industrial society. This meant places not so much of recreation and 'play,' but of emotional restoration, restored health (public and personal) and spiritual renewal. In fact, Olmsted was not particularly supportive of active, physical recreation. At the time, both urban and rural dwellers had enough physical activity as part of their labor-intensive work. (Today, we know we have a different condition relative to societal health related to exercise). However, the ideas of respite, restoration, and environmental 'immersion' were key to Olmsted's landscape compositions.

Olmsted was also interested in creating powerful environmental and civic settings to allow people of different societal stations to interact on 'common ground.' He believed that by encouraging the interactions of a diverse population, individuals would develop a stronger sense of Reverence towards nature and towards each other, with a more respectful heart about the needs and values of all members of our society.

Olmsted understood that industrial laborers in the North needed physical respite, and the value in creating a setting where the families of different backgrounds could interact and attain a newfound sense of respect for each other. As a culturally diverse city of immigrants, New York was a place of deep ethnic divides and well-defined cultural neighborhoods. Olmsted believed that if the parks of the North could succeed in a new sense of Reverence, they might serve as a model for the Reconstructing South, and that the newly emancipated members of society could walk side-by-side with others.

He also knew that by building parks of strong environmental and civic identity, everyone could have the opportunity to appreciate quality, character, and beauty in their physical environment as an accessible part of their lives. This was the genesis of the City Beautiful Movement, in search of a strong civic infrastructure that would enrich lives in diverse and immeasurable ways.

I do not wish to convey that Olmsted's parks resulted in the immediate solution to all of society's issues. Clearly, we continue to struggle today with a society fractured along economic, racial, cultural, ethnic, religious and political lines. And we are challenged to maintain emotional and mental health amid a world of increasing complexity and velocity. However, I think we can agree that when we visit the places where Olmsted worked, we rediscover the effects of Re-Creation and Reverence in our own minds and in our interactions with others.

Today, as we work to build better communities, we are being put to an extraordinary test that brings these old ideas of Re-Creation and Reverence back into focus. We need to be outside more than we need to look at the television. We need to exercise our legs, open our hearts, and engage with the natural environment. And we are hungry for an opportunity to talk to others face to face, even if it is simply a knowing and respectful 'hello' to a stranger in the park.

We recognize that we are experiencing COVID-19 together; however, we are not all in the same 'boat'. We need Re-Creation and Reverence for our neighbors and for our communities who are affected in different ways. We all share the same fundamental human needs.

An Enduring Legacy

Frederick Law Olmsted is one of my heroes. There are many great 'designers' that are part of the American story. However, design is just a means to create a setting for human activity and emotive response. Olmsted's park designs remain timeless because they are driven by an aspiration for community and society that remains relevant in today's world and in our daily lives. I will close with a brief summary of Olmsted's contributions to the American Landscape, in Urban and Natural settings.

More on Olmsted: Pioneering Landscape Architecture in America

Olmsted designed many of the most significant landscapes in North America from about 1850 until his death in 1903. This includes park places ranging from Niagara Falls and Mount Pleasant (Montreal); elaborate parks systems such as the [Emerald Necklace](#) in Boston; and city-wide parks plans in [Buffalo](#), Chicago, Milwaukee, and across the Midwest. He directed renowned campus plans for [Stanford University](#), U.C. Berkeley and Wellesley College. He was the Landscape Architect and master planning partner to Daniel Burnham for the 1893 [Chicago World's Fair](#), which changed the entire world perspective of American society. Olmsted was a conservationist, a contemporary and collaborator with John Muir, in places from the Adirondacks to the [Yosemite Valley](#). His work was an integration of the 'constructed landscape' and the conservation and restoration of natural systems.

Olmsted also set the pattern for 'first ring' trolley-based suburbs that were developing immediately adjacent to urban centers across the Midwest. [Riverside, Illinois](#) integrated walkable blocks with prominently placed civic open space; mixed-use development connected by dramatic parks systems.

Riverside can be seen in the work of another contemporary of the late 1800's, landscape architect [John Nolen](#), who was a widely sourced influence on the early formation of the [Congress for the New Urbanism](#) in the 1990's, some 100 years later, rediscovering a human centered, neighborhood approach to community planning.

So, Frederick Law Olmsted was an incredibly important creator of revered American landscapes, both in urban and natural settings. His work has resulted in many of the most valuable places in America by any environmental, cultural, or economic measure.

For more on Frederick Law Olmsted, I recommend the books: *Genius of Place: The Life of Frederick Law Olmsted*; *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape*; and *Civilizing American Cities: Writings on City Landscapes*.

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It's Frederick Law Olmsted's 198th Birthday. I wanted to share some thoughts about Olmsted's work and continued relevance today. [#worldlandscapearchitecturemonth](#) [#communitysolutionsgrp](#) [#nrpa](#)