



CONSERVATION

Geniuses of place

Ethan Carr traces the arc of influence in landscape creation and preservation from ‘Capability’ Brown to Frederick Law Olmsted and the US National Park Service.

A coincidence of commemorative dates makes this year an important one in the history of landscape design and scenic preservation. As the 300th anniversary of the birth of the landscape gardener Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown is celebrated on one side of the Atlantic, the United States is marking the centenary of the National Park Service, the federal agency that acts as the steward of the nation’s most iconic natural areas and historic shrines. The two are connected by the complex and evolving cultural construction of ‘nature’, its representations, its manifestations and its benefits.

Brown’s landscape parks expressed the eighteenth-century’s fascination with nature itself, which was increasingly the subject of scientific inquiry and a plethora of botanical and zoological discoveries. Nature offered templates for ordering society, too. When the poet Alexander Pope exhorted, “In all, let Nature never be forgot,” he was describing more than the new style of landscape gardening. Brown’s composed

scenes of pastoral greenswards and planted woodlands expressed picturesque aesthetic theory; they also imposed a more scientific and modern order on the land.

In the United States, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted developed his own ‘natural style’ in the nineteenth century. Olmsted was deeply influenced by his experiences in Britain, which he described in his first book, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* (1852). In the spring of 1850, he visited Birkenhead Park in north-west England, noting that in “democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable to this People’s Garden”. Olmsted also responded to the countryside itself, and, above all, to the landscape parks he visited. About the designer of the grounds at Eaton Hall in Cheshire, he wrote: “What artist, so noble... as he who, with far-reaching conception of beauty and designing power, sketches the outline, writes the colours, and directs the shadows of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed upon

it for generations, before the work he has arranged for her shall realize his intentions.”

That artist was Brown, who had died in 1783. His park landscapes, now mature, thoroughly impressed the young “American farmer”. Sweeping meadows, clumps and belts of native (and North American) trees, sheets of impounded water and winding drives were the elements that shaped the aesthetics and image of the “natural” in an urbanizing and industrializing world.

Olmsted soon assumed the mantle of artist himself. At first, he worked with a partner: the English architect Calvert Vaux, with whom he won the competition for the design of New York City’s Central Park in 1858. Olmsted returned to England several times. He expressed ambivalence towards

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Victorian design trends, which emphasized ‘gardenesque’ displays of floriculture and frankly artificial arrangements of

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California's Yosemite Valley was one of the first US national parks.

specimen plants. Olmsted's taste could be considered atavistic. Like Brown, he sought to create compositions of larger 'landscape effects', devoid of elaborate flower gardens or other distractions from the fundamental experience of scenery. In practice, Olmsted created dramatic sequences of landscapes — expansive greenswards, serpentine lakes, picturesque rambles — and eschewed buildings, geometric layouts and flower beds. He would not have another kindred spirit in British landscape gardening until 1870, when William Robinson — who later designed the grounds of Gravetye Manor in Sussex — published the book *Wild Garden*. Robinson visited Olmsted in New York that year, and the two maintained a correspondence and a mutual admiration.

THE LIE OF THE LAND

Olmsted was also influenced by continued progress in contemporary natural sciences, especially geology, which he knew mostly through the work of the researchers Louis

Agassiz and Nathaniel Shaler at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. With Vaux and on his own, Olmsted exploited existing geological formations in his large municipal-park designs to create specific effects and to structure the overall landscape composition.

“Nature offered templates for ordering society.”

design features (and construction materials) in Central Park and Franklin Park, respectively. In Brooklyn, New York, the terminal moraine glacial morphology of Long Island became the framework for the entire conception of Prospect Park as a sequence of landscape experiences, from the high ground of the main entrance down to the glacial outwash plain, in which a large lake was excavated. What Pope described as

the “genius of the place”, for Olmsted, resided in the landscape's skeleton — its geological foundations — which he often exposed and highlighted, and around which landscape effects and overall patterns of how people might use the park could be structured.

As a public intellectual, Olmsted also developed the political rhetoric and economic justifications for larger regional and national scenic reservations. In 1865, the governor of California asked him to prepare a report to guide the management of Yosemite Valley. This granite gorge hidden in the Sierra Nevada mountains is one of the great geological landscapes of the continent. It became the site, more than any other, where the idea of the national park took shape. It was for Yosemite that Olmsted provided the philosophical framework for state and national park-making in the United States. He noted that it was “the main duty of government” to protect and provide the means for the “pursuit of happiness”. That pursuit, for Olmsted, ►

► depended on preserving such places and creating public access to them.

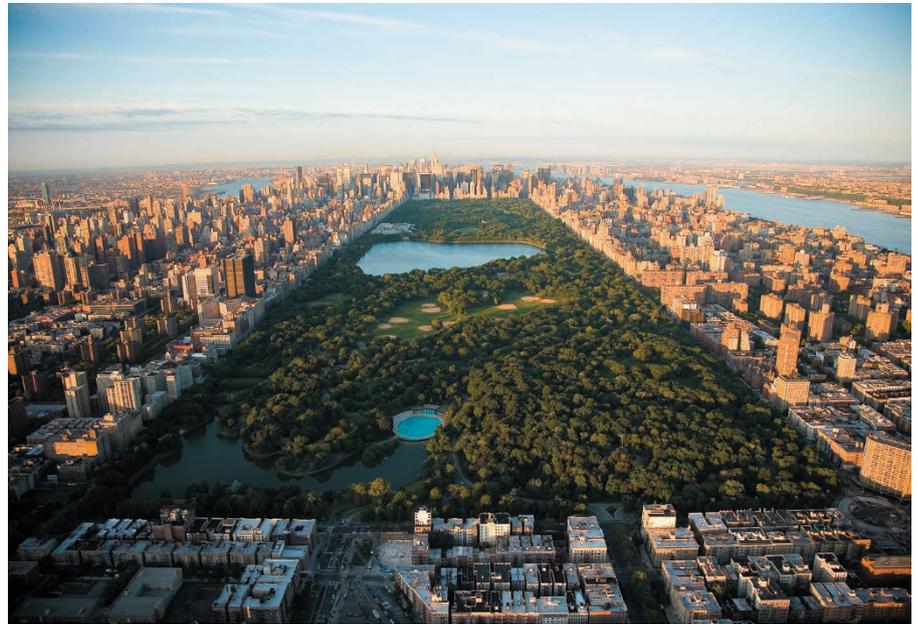
“It is a scientific fact,” he asserted, “that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character ... is favorable to the health and vigor of men.” The government had a duty to assure that “enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country and the means of recreation connected with them” be “laid open to the use of the body of the people”. If the government did not act, those places would be monopolized by the few and their benefits experienced only by an elite. The establishment of “great public grounds” was therefore required of a republic that derived its authority from its people.

There was a continuity and consistency in the overall purposes that Olmsted described for public parks and scenic reservations, as well as in his design recommendations for both. At Yosemite Valley and New York’s Niagara Falls (for which he and Vaux prepared the state-park plan in 1887), for example, the challenge was to protect the awesome existing features from damage by visitors, and to choreograph the sequence and pace of their visits in the design of roads, paths and other facilities, without marring the scenery with buildings.

SHAPING DEMOCRACY

Brown is supposed to have said, “One does not go up and down steps in nature”, referencing his preference for smoothly graded contours over retaining walls or terraces. In their Central Park competition entry, Olmsted and Vaux similarly insisted that: “the interest of the visitor ... should concentrate on features of natural, in preference to artificial, beauty ... Architectural structures should be confessedly subservient to the main idea.” In the changed context of nineteenth-century, urbanizing US society, the main purpose of the large, public park (whether municipal, state or national) remained constant: to provide a dramatic sequence of affecting landscape experiences and effects, unencumbered by encroachments, and now made available to “the body of the people”.

This rhetoric of public park-making is particularly important while the centenary of the National Park Service is being celebrated. Congress created the agency in 1916, giving it a famous mandate “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life” of the national parks, and “to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations”. This key portion of the legislation was written by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr, who continued his father’s professional practice in the twentieth century, and who was directly inspired by his father’s



Top: Capability Brown’s garden at Blenheim Palace, UK; bottom: Central Park, New York.

Yosemite report in drafting the park-service bill.

Congress had created national parks in the mid-nineteenth century — notably Yosemite in 1864 and Yellowstone, Wyoming, in 1872. But the far-flung group of about 35 reservations had remained relatively inaccessible to most people. That changed with the advent of affordable and reliable automobiles. The park service was created to better manage both the great potential for public enjoyment and the great peril to the parks presented by vastly increased numbers of tourists in cars.

Today, there are more than 400 ‘units’ in the national-park system, including scores of historic sites, memorial landscapes and archaeological sites, in addition to the better-known large-scale wilderness reservations. The national parks are often characterized as

‘America’s best idea’, a bromide that obscures as much as acknowledges their significance and origins. The idea was rooted in the nineteenth-century park movement, and therefore in the thought reflected in the elder Olmsted’s writings, and embodied in his designs. These in turn have unambiguous links to that “artist so noble”, born 300 years ago, Capability Brown. ■

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