

TREND

LINE

OLMSTED FOR A NEW CENTURY

Three Cities, Three Paths in the Footsteps of the Inspirer

Sliced, diced, and in one case censured, the handiwork of Frederick Law Olmsted and his firm has survived and thrived in different mixes of geography, climate, politics, and history. Here, directors of three groups discuss why: **Susan Rademacher of the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, Deborah Trimble of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, and Robert García of the Los Angeles Center for Law in the Public Interest**, who takes inspiration from an Olmsted plan that never was, but might be one day. As budgets shrink for urban parks, these organizations have been critical to carrying on the Olmsted legacy.

Interviewed by Lucy Lawliss National Park Service Park Historic Structures and Cultural Landscapes and **Charles Birnbaum** National Park Service Historic Landscape Initiative

Near right: Louisville's Cherokee Park. **Center, far right:** Fairsted, Olmsted's home and office in Brookline, MA, a national historic site not far from the Longwood Avenue Bridge, part of a system that Olmsted designed for Boston. **Opposite:** Utility and beauty, prime goals in Olmsted's work, are realized at Cherokee Park.



LAWLISS: Buffalo has the Olmsted firm's first park-and-boulevard system.

TRIMBLE: Yes. In 1868, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., was invited here by a group of businessmen who wanted something similar to Central Park. He was so impressed with Joseph Ellicott's radial street design that he said I'm not going to give you a park, I'm going to give you a system—the first with interconnecting parkways. He picked the locations too, also a first. He came back to do two more parks in the south, and one in the north, Riverside Park.

His vision was to connect them, but the railroads, the river, and geography got in the way.

LAWLISS: Did the city grow out to the parks?

TRIMBLE: They really did govern the city's growth. Delaware Park, now in the center of town, was then on the outskirts. Today, amazingly, the system is mostly intact.

We do have a few major issues. The main one is dealing with the dismantling of Humboldt Parkway, whose median once held eight rows of trees. The city made it an expressway in the late 1950s, disconnecting what is now a very poor African American neighborhood from the rest of the system. This was a huge loss for the entire city.

Delaware Park is cut in half by an expressway along its original bridal path. So even though it's our largest park, with 350 acres, it doesn't feel that way. It's dangerous to cross from one side to the other.

BIRNBAUM: This was when they put schools in the parks?

TRIMBLE: That was a bit later. Our group was founded in 1978, to stop the construction of a magnet school next to the Science Museum, which is in a park. Unfortunately, we lost.

BIRNBAUM: Had things decayed to that point?

TRIMBLE: There was little value in the park system, and horrible leadership. Our parks commissioner went to jail. He even threw chemicals into the lake at Delaware Park so it wouldn't freeze.

RIGHT AND FAR LEFT: TED WATHEN; CENTER LEFT AND NEAR LEFT: ROBERT BURLEY, COURTESY STEPHEN BULGER GALLERY





BIRNBAUM: Susan, Buffalo's experience seems to parallel Louisville's.

RADEMACHER: Yes. We have Frederick Law Olmsted's last system of parks and parkways. His vision was to create three large parks. Each would preserve a different kind of landscape, and together they would meet all the needs that a great urban park should, from sports and recreation, to promenading, to picnicking, to wilderness hiking.

Olmsted focused very much on scenic design, on a multi-dimensional experience. It was about light and shadow, about moving from one elevation to another, about going from closed woods to clearings, about a sense of discovery. He was keenly attuned to the land.

As in Buffalo, there were three parkways heading out to the parks, which were just outside city limits, partly to encourage growth. But they were never connected because growth outstripped park development. Today we're trying to connect them.

The firm continued to work in Louisville, so we have a combination of destination parks—where you'd spend the whole day perhaps traveling cross town on the trolley—and small neighborhood parks where you'd go after work.

The parks both large and small are fairly intact. A tornado and flood hit two of the destination parks; in one, an earth levee now obscures the Ohio River, so you can't take in the 360-degree vista of water and land that Olmsted intended. That's a real disconnect.

An interstate also chopped off the edge of two of the large parks. The good news is that this road, built in the 1960s, created a tremendous movement to save our parks. This was at a time when highway development was a juggernaut.

The outpouring of concern led to several concessions by the state highway department, most notably saving a significant park hill by tunneling underneath instead of blasting through. The department was also compelled to use limestone facing along that section—to capture some of the park's character—and build a bridge for the bridle trail, the only one over an interstate, as far as we know.

BIRNBAUM: Is the system in the National Register of Historic Places?

RADEMACHER: It was listed in 1982, at a time when listings didn't have to be very detailed. We'd like to amend it to include contributing features and the smaller parks, to improve protection.

LAWLISS: Debbie, is your park system listed?

TRIMBLE: Yes. Our listing is pretty extensive, but we'd like to do a little

amending also. We're very interested in national landmark status.

RADEMACHER: We are too.

BIRNBAUM: Robert, I know your situation is very different.

GARCÍA: Olmsted Brothers and a local firm, Harland Bartholomew and Associates, prepared a report, published in 1930, called *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*. It envisioned a web of parks, playgrounds, forests, schools, beaches, and transportation that would not only improve L.A.—full of open space at the time—but also promote health and economic vitality for everybody.

The report, commissioned by the chamber of commerce, was killed by the *Los Angeles Times* and other powerful interests in a triumph of private greed over public space. Yet today the report's spirit lives on to inspire advocates to recapture part of the lost beauty of Los Angeles.

The rule of thumb was this: if the plan proposed it, the city did the opposite. The report recommended 71,000 acres of parks, with another 91,000 in outlying areas including access to the forests. The heart of the plan was 214 miles of interconnecting parkways, which would have greened the Los Angeles River. The report called for a doubling of public beach, foreseeing less access as homes on the ocean rose in value.

Today many people don't realize there is a river. It goes 51 miles from the San Fernando Valley through the heart of downtown to the ocean at Long Beach. In 1936, because of chronic floods, the Army Corps of Engineers was called in. They poured concrete along the entire length, to speed the flow to the sea. Now it's the most degraded river in the world. Many think it's a sewer.

The problem was defined as flood control. If other options had been considered, like giving children a place to play or having runoff percolate into a natural bottom, the outcome would have been different.

LAWLISS: How did you reclaim the Olmsted vision?

GARCÍA: About five or six years ago, Mike Davis, in his book *The Ecology of Fear*, had a chapter called "How Eden Lost Its Garden" that talked about the Olmsted report. That sent me looking for a copy. Only about 200 copies were printed, but I finally I found one at USC. We've made hundreds of copies since; some of the maps are in color.

I'm the Johnny Appleseed of the report. We have a digital edition made with GIS mapping software. It's Olmsted for the 21st century.

The Olmsted plan is our group's driving vision. Had it been adopt-



“THE OLMSTED PLAN IS OUR GROUP’S DRIVING VISION. HAD IT BEEN ADOPTED, TODAY LOS ANGELES WOULD BE ONE OF THE WORLD’S MOST BEAUTIFUL CITIES. INSTEAD IT’S PARK POOR, WITH FEWER ACRES PER 1,000 RESIDENTS THAN ANY MAJOR CITY.” —ROBERT GARCÍA, CENTER FOR LAW IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Above left: Judith Baca’s mural “The Great Wall of Los Angeles” depicts freeways dissecting East L.A. while residents are removed for Dodger Stadium. **Above center:** Proposed L.A. school with premium outdoor space. **Above right:** Taylor Yard, abutting the Los Angeles River, site of a new park that will help resurrect Olmsted’s vision of green space in the city.

ed, today Los Angeles would be one of the world’s most beautiful cities. Instead it’s park poor, with fewer acres per 1,000 residents than any major urban area. And there are disparities based on race, ethnicity, income, and access to a car. In the inner city there are .3 acres per 1,000 residents compared to 1.7 acres in white, relatively wealthy L.A. That’s six times as much.

But everyone is bad off. The national standard is 6 to 10 acres per 1,000. And instead of green parkways, we got a city sliced up by concrete channels, with no transit to the trails or the national forests, and rich homeowners trying to cut off access to the beach.

There is good news. The urban park movement, which we fostered, has succeeded in creating some major new parks: in Taylor Yard along the river, in Ascot Hills, in Latino East L.A., and in Baldwin Hills, the historic African American heart of Los Angeles. The flagship is the Cornfield, a 32-acre site in the heart of downtown.

About five years ago, the city and Ed Roske, one of the nation’s wealthiest men, wanted to build warehouses without doing an environmental impact report. This area was the Ellis Island of Los Angeles where every major racial and ethnic group came through. It’s right down the street from El Pueblo de Los Angeles, where the first European settlers arrived in about 1780, close to the largest Native American village at the time.

We spearheaded one of the most diverse alliances ever behind an issue. Now it’s going to be a state park. The *Los Angeles Times* has called it a heroic monument and symbol of hope. And we’ve had other victories since.

BIRNBAUM: Is the Olmsted name a rallying point, a brand name?

TRIMBLE: It really helped when we did signage identifying the Olmsted parks with a gold tree. There was little public recognition before that. People love the national significance—until they want a new soccer field. And we’ve drawn the 20-somethings into philanthropy with their version of a black-tie special event—a summer bash with a bandstand floating in the lake.

RADEMACHER: Over the last 14 years, there has been enough media coverage here, enough visible change, that we have a high level of penetration. People know that an Olmsted park is something special, a tremendous point of pride in a neighborhood.

We’re working with a number of disenfranchised areas here in town, and with kids through the schools. We did a documentary with local public television. One of the challenges is getting civic leaders to see the work of Olmsted’s sons as worth saving too.

GARCÍA: I bring so much bad news I wonder why you asked me in on the interview. Remember, this is Los Angeles, the city famous for forgetting its history. Everything is a hard sell.

That said, the Olmsted plan was developed before the environmental movement, before the civil rights movement, before smart growth. It’s simply a good idea. That’s marketable. Today, five years into our campaign, officials use the words “Olmsted plan” a lot more.

Our thrust is to create a heritage parkscape that links about 100 cultural, historical, and environmental sites throughout the region. Signage is important. Look at the trail markers at San Francisco’s Golden Gate National Recreation Area. They give the sense that the city is one big park. L.A. should do this, too.

BIRNBAUM: The parks are part nature, part culture. How do you deal with that divide?

TRIMBLE: These are living, breathing landscapes. You want to respect the vision but at the same time the parks are vibrant gathering places.

Olmsted wasn’t a huge fan of flowers but, as in Central Park, we want to mark the entrances as a special place. In today’s mindset that often means more color in the plantings.

RADEMACHER: We start with the genius of the place, using native materials to punch up the experience. The firm used the phrase “aesthetic forestry” to describe showy native flowering trees in greater profusion around the edges, a heightened effect than what you’d get naturally.

Olmsted, Sr., had an experimental bent. We seek a richer natural palette, a more expressive ecological fabric that befits the experience that he intended. When there’s a conflict with his intent, we experiment a little bit, observe, and adjust.

GARCÍA: Certainly for Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., parks and civil rights were his twin passions. This motivates our work in Los Angeles, where people of color and low income suffer first and worst



from lack of parks. We want a better community for all. We emphasize that message to a range of stakeholders.

L.A. has over \$14 billion—with a B—to build and modernize schools. That will add 240 acres of open space to over 2,000 acres of schoolyards. There's a lot of potential. We're about bringing the simple choice of playing outdoors to the children of Los Angeles. Closely related to that is the issue of health.

In the L.A. school district, the second largest in the country, 87 percent of the children are not physically fit. In 40 of the schools, zero—none—are. It's not that they're fat and lazy and spend too much time watching video games. They simply don't have enough places to play. This has larger implications. Male athletes are four times more likely to get into an Ivy League school. For girls the advantage is greater.

Parks provide green space, cool air, and clear water. And we emphasize economic value in terms of increasing property values, creating jobs for small businesses, and providing jobs for local workers.

For the Cornfield, we went to Cardinal Mahoney for support from the spiritual community. He asked why should he worry about a park with so many other problems here. We said because of the wider implications. He personally wrote to the governor and state leaders. Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchu praised our work as a way of saying no to war, no to violence, and giving our children hope.

Building community from the ground up is one of our goals. Diversifying democracy. Seeing people who have never participated in government stand up to city hall and the wealthy developers—and win.

TRIMBLE: That's the beauty of parks. You become engaged for so many different reasons.

RADEMACHER: The nature part is a lot easier than the culture part. But it means setting down your expectations. You have to really look to understand all the ways of viewing the space, all the desires for using it, and find the balance by working with people.

LAWLISS: What is your vision for the next 20 years? Debbie?

TRIMBLE: Imagine acres of impeccable green space in the heart of the city, with lush gardens, and majestic trees, and children frolicking in fountains of water. Imagine picnickers celebrating family reunions and neighbors fixing up their homes to match the beauty of the parks. That imagery is very powerful in a city that doesn't have a whole lot of pride of late.

Above, right: Buffalo's parks evidence Olmsted's penchant for the pastoral and picturesque, his idea of indefinite boundaries and a constant opening of new views.

LAWLISS: Susan?

RADEMACHER: Debbie used the word beauty. That's very undervalued. We won't have great cities without great parks.

I'd like to see the parks as places where people come together in all the old ways, to play and rub elbows and discover their likenesses amidst their differences, where they put their hands on the land and take ownership in its ongoing care. Unfortunately, I don't see a huge improvement in the ability of the public agencies to manage. It really rests in the hands and hearts of the people.

LAWLISS: Robert?

GARCÍA: Three cities the size of Chicago will move into our region in the next 20 years. If something isn't done, L.A. will simply strangle itself.

There is hope. In the past five years, state voters passed some \$10 to \$12 billion in park bonds and one of them, so-called Prop 40, demolished the myth that the environment is a luxury that people of color and low income do not care about or can't afford. The proposition—creating a \$2.6 billion bond, the largest resource bond in U.S. history—earned the support of 77 percent of black voters, 74 percent of Latinos, 60 percent of Asians, and 56 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

It will take that level of commitment. Olmsted inspired the vision. The people of Los Angeles, and its leaders, must embrace it.

For more information, contact Susan Rademacher, President, Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, email susan.Rademacher@loukymetro.org, www.olmstedparks.org; Deborah Trimble, Executive Director, Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, email info@buffaloolmstedparks.org, www.buffaloolmstedparks.org; and Robert García, Executive Director and Counsel, Center for Law in the Public Interest, email info@clipi.org, www.clipi.org.

Also go to the National Association for Olmsted Parks at www.olmsted.org. This year is the 25th anniversary of the association, founded to foster friends groups and partnerships in support of the Olmsted legacy. Lucy Lawliss is association cochair, email lucy_lawliss@nps.gov; Charles Birnbaum is an association trustee, email charles_birnbaum@nps.gov. The National Park Service Historic Landscape Initiative is at www.cr.nps.gov/hps/hli.

TRENDLINE

“IMAGINE ACRES OF IMPECCABLE GREEN SPACE IN THE HEART OF THE CITY, WITH LUSH GARDENS, AND MAJESTIC TREES, AND CHILDREN FROLICKING IN FOUNTAINS OF WATER. IMAGINE PICNICKERS CELEBRATING FAMILY REUNIONS AND NEIGHBORS FIXING UP THEIR HOMES TO MATCH THE BEAUTY OF THE PARKS. THAT IMAGERY IS VERY POWERFUL IN A CITY THAT DOESN'T HAVE A WHOLE LOT OF PRIDE OF LATE.” —DEBORAH TRIMBLE, BUFFALO OLMSTED PARKS CONSERVANCY

LEFT: BUFFALO OLMSTED CONSERVANCY; BELOW: ROBERT BURLEY, COURTESY STEPHEN BULGER GALLERY

