

The Need for Public Parks

Frederick Law Olmsted



OVERVIEW

The population of cities grew dramatically after the Civil War, bringing problems such as overcrowding, lack of adequate transportation, and unhealthful living conditions. Frederick Law Olmsted, a landscape architect and engineer, called for city planning and, especially the development of public parks. His best-known achievement is New York City's Central Park. The following excerpts are from a speech he delivered in Boston in 1870.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- What improvements would Olmsted like to make in cities?
 - What are Olmsted's reasons for wanting to develop park systems?
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WE BEGAN EXPERIMENTALLY with street railways twenty years ago. At present, in New York, one pair of horses serves to convey one hundred people, on an average, every day at a rate of fare about one-fiftieth of the old hackney coach rates; and the total number of fares collected annually is equal to that of the population of the United States. And yet thousands walk a number of miles every day because they cannot be seated in the cars. It is impossible to fix a limit to the amount of travel which really ample, convenient, and still cheap means of transportation for short distances would develop. Certain improvements have caused the whole number of people seeking conveyances in London to be doubled in the last five years, and yet the supply keeps nowhere near the demand.

See how rapidly we are really gaining and what we have to expect. Two recent inventions give us the means of reducing by a third, under favorable circumstances, the cost of good McAdam roads. There have been sixteen patents issued from one office for other new forms of perfectly smooth and nearly noiseless street pavement, some of which, after two or three years' trial, promise so well as to render it certain that some improvement will soon come by which more than one of the present special annoyances of town life will be abated. An improvement in our sewer system seems near at hand, also, which will add considerably to the comparative advantages of a residence in towns, and especially the more open town suburbs.

Experiments indicate that it is feasible to send heated air through a town in pipes like water; and that it may be drawn upon; and the heat which is taken, measured and paid for according to quantity required. Thus may come a great saving of fuel and trouble in a very difficult department of domestic economy. No one will think of applying such a system to farmhouses.

Again, it is plain that we have scarcely begun to turn to account the advantages offered to townspeople in the electric telegraph; we really have not made a beginning with those offered in the pneumatic tube, though their substantial character has been demonstrated. By the use of these two instruments, a tradesman ten miles away on the other side of a town may be communicated with, and goods obtained from him by a housekeeper, as quickly and with as little personal inconvenience as now if he were in the next block. A single tube station for 500 families, acoustic pipes for the transmission of orders to it from each house, with a carriers' service for local distribution of packages, is all that is needed for this purpose.

As to the economy which comes by systematizing and concentrating, by the application of a large apparatus, of processes which are otherwise conducted in a desultory way, wasteful of human strength, as by public laundries, bakeries, and kitchens, we are yet, in America, even in our larger cities, far behind many of the smaller towns of the Old World. . . .

It is hardly a matter of speculation, I am disposed to think, but almost of demonstration that the larger a town becomes because simply of its advantages for commercial purposes, the greater will be the convenience available to those who live in and near it for cooperation, as well with reference to the accumulation of wealth in the higher forms—as in seats of learning, of science, and of art—as with reference to merely domestic economy and the emancipation of both men and women from petty, confining, and narrowing cares.

It also appears to be nearly certain that the recent rapid enlargement of towns and withdrawal of people from rural conditions of living is the result mainly of circumstances of a permanent character.

We have reason to believe, then, that towns which of late have been increasing rapidly on account of their commercial advantages are likely to be still more attractive to population in the future; that there will, in consequence, soon be larger towns than any the world has yet known; and that the further progress of civilization is to depend mainly upon the influences by which men's minds and characters will be affected while living in large towns.

Now, knowing that the average length of the life of mankind in towns has been much less than in the country, and that the average amount of disease and misery and of vice and crime has been much greater in towns, this would be a very dark prospect for civilization, if it were not that modern science has beyond all question determined many of the causes of the special evils by which men are afflicted in towns and placed means in our hands for guarding against them. . . .

But although it has been demonstrated by such experiments that we have it in our power to greatly lessen and counteract the two classes of evils we have had under consideration, it must be remembered that these means are made use of only with great difficulty. . . .

We will, for the present, set before our minds the two sources of wear and corruption which we have seen to be remediable and therefore preventible. We may admit that commerce requires that in some parts of a town there shall be an arrangement of buildings and a character of streets and of traffic in them which will establish conditions of corruption and of irritation, physical and mental. But commerce does not require the same conditions to be maintained in all parts of a town.

Air is disinfected by sunlight and foliage. Foliage also acts mechanically to purify the air by screening it. Opportunity and inducement to escape at frequent intervals from the confined and vitiated air of the commercial quarter, and to supply the lungs with air screened and purified by trees and recently acted upon by sunlight, together with opportunity and inducement to escape from conditions requiring vigilance, wariness, and activity toward other men—if these could be supplied economically, our problem would be solved. . . .

Now that our towns are built without walls and we can have all the room that we like, is there any good reason why we should not make some similar difference between parts which are likely to be dwelt in and those which will be required exclusively for commerce?

Would trees, for seclusion and shade and beauty, be out of place, for instance, by the side of certain of our streets? It will, perhaps, appear to you that it is hardly necessary to ask such a question, as throughout the United States trees are commonly planted at the sides of streets. Unfortunately they are seldom so planted as to have fairly settled the question of the desirableness of systematically maintaining trees under these circumstances. . . .

What I would ask is, whether we might not with economy make special provision in some of our streets—in a twentieth or a fiftieth part, if you please, of all—for trees to remain as a permanent furniture of the city? I mean, to make a place for them in which they would have room to grow naturally and gracefully. Even if the distance between the houses should have to be made half as much again as it is required to be in our commercial streets, could not the space be afforded? Out-of-town space is not costly when measures to secure it are taken early. The assessments for benefit where such streets were provided for would, in nearly all cases, defray the cost of the land required. The strips of ground reserved for the trees, six, twelve, twenty feet wide, would cost nothing for paving or flagging.

The change both of scene and of air which would be obtained by people engaged for the most part in the necessarily confined interior commercial parts of the town, on passing into a street of this character after the trees had become stately and graceful, would be worth a good deal. If such streets were made still broader in some parts, with spacious malls, the advantage would be increased. . . .

There is an instinctive inclination to this social, neighborly, unexertive form of recreation among all of us. In one way or another it is sure to be

constantly operating upon those millions on millions of men and women who are to pass their lives within a few miles of where we now stand. . . .

For this purpose . . . we want a ground to which people may easily go after their day's work is done, and where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets—where they shall, in effect, find the city put far away from them. . . . Practically, what we most want is a simple, broad, open space of clean greensward, with sufficient play of surface and a sufficient number of trees about it to supply a variety of light and shade. This we want as a central feature. We want depth of wood enough about it not only for comfort in hot weather but to completely shut out the city from our landscapes.

The word "park," in town nomenclature, should, I think, be reserved for grounds of the character and purpose thus described.

Not only as being the most valuable of all possible forms of public places but regarded simply as a large space which will seriously interrupt crosstown communication wherever it occurs, the question of the site and bounds of the park requires to be determined with much more deliberation and art than is often secured for any problem of distant and extended municipal interests. . . . The park should, as far as possible, complement the town.

Openness is the one thing you cannot get in buildings. Picturesqueness you can get. Let your buildings be as picturesque as your artists can make them. This is the beauty of a town. Consequently, the beauty of the park should be the other. It should be the beauty of the fields, the meadow, the prairie, of the green pastures, and the still waters. What we want to gain is tranquillity and rest to the mind. . . .

A park, fairly well managed near a large town, will surely become a new center of that town. With the determination of location, size, and boundaries should therefore be associated the duty of arranging new trunk routes of communication between it and the distant parts of the town existing and forecasted.

These may be either narrow informal elongations of the park, varying say from 200 to 500 feet in width and radiating irregularly from it, or if, unfortunately, the town is already laid out in the unhappy way that New York and Brooklyn, San Francisco and Chicago are, and, I am glad to say, Boston is not, on a plan made long years ago by a man who never saw a spring carriage and who had a conscientious dread of the Graces, then we must probably adopt formal parkways. They should be so planned and constructed as never to be noisy and seldom crowded, and so also that the straightforward movement of pleasure carriages need never be obstructed, unless at absolutely necessary crossings, by slowgoing, heavy vehicles used for commercial purposes.

If possible, also, they should be branched or reticulated with other ways of a similar class, so that no part of the town should finally be many minutes' walk from some one of them; and they should be made interesting by a

process of planting and decoration, so that in necessarily passing through them, whether in going to or from the park, or to and from business, some substantial recreative advantage may be incidentally gained. . . .

The New York legislature of 1851 passed a bill providing for a park on the east side of the island. Afterward, the same legislature, precipitately and quite as an afterthought, passed the act under which the city took title to the site of the greater part of the present Central Park. . . . The question of the relative value of what is called offhand common sense, and of special, deliberate, businesslike study, must be settled in the case of the Central Park, by a comparison of benefit with cost. During the last four years, over 30 million visits have been made to the park by actual count, and many have passed uncounted. From 50,000 to 80,000 persons on foot, 30,000 in carriages, and 4,000 to 5,000 on horseback have often entered it in a day.

Among the frequent visitors, I have found all those who, a few years ago, believed it impossible that there should ever be a park in this republican country—and especially in New York of all places in this country—which would be a suitable place of resort for "gentlemen." They, their wives and daughters, frequent the park more than they do the opera or the church. There are many men of wealth who resort to the park habitually and regularly, as much so as businessmen to their places of business. Of course, there is a reason for it, and a reason based upon their experience. . . .

The lives of women and children too poor to be sent to the country can now be saved in thousands of instances by making them go to the park. During a hot day in July last, I counted at one time in the park eighteen separate groups, consisting of mothers with their children, most of whom were under school age, taking picnic dinners which they had brought from home with them. The practice is increasing under medical advice, especially when summer complaint is rife.

The much greater rapidity with which patients convalesce and may be returned with safety to their ordinary occupations after severe illness, when they can be sent to the park for a few hours a day, is beginning to be understood. The addition thus made to the productive labor of the city is not unimportant.