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Every Tree Fixed with a Purpose: Contesting Value in Olmsted's Parks

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Abstract

Olmsted was an influential landscape architect whose works include many parks, recreation grounds and more. Inspired by Romantic and transcendentalist thinkers, he developed 'pastoral transcendentalism', a style of designing parks that mimicked natural spaces to reproduce their values within cities. Although environmental justice scholars have pointed out how these designs limit access to parks, I argue that environmental philosophers have not adequately discussed Olmsted, particularly his axiology of nature. Reflecting on it reveals how environmental injustice consists not only of restricting access to nature to protect its essential value – for Olmsted, scenery that could induce a contemplative mindset – but in delimiting nature's value without consideration of how people actually appreciate it.

[E]very foot of the Park's surface, every tree and bush, as well as every arch, roadway and walk has been fixed where it is with a purpose, and upon its being so used that it may continue to serve that purpose to the best advantage, and upon its not being otherwise used, depends its value.¹

Introduction

Frederick Law Olmsted was an influential American landscape architect. His works appear all over North America and include hundreds of parks (such as New York's Central Park and Prospect Park), recreation grounds, private estates, university campuses and more. Olmsted's advocacy for parks was crucial for their spread in and outside of cities in the 19th century. When construction on Central Park began in

¹ Olmsted (1873: 299); emphasis original.

1857, no city in the United States had completed an urban park of comparable scale. For reference, Yellowstone became the nation's first national park in 1872. Today, about 40 million people visit Central Park each year² compared to just under 13 million visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the most popular US national park.³ Olmsted's work continues to influence North Americans' understanding and experience of natural spaces within cities and beyond.⁴ Yet, Olmsted's philosophy has largely been neglected by environmental philosophers,⁵ perhaps because many still presume depopulated wilderness is a better representation of nature than park space (Elliot, 1982).

Yet Olmsted drew inspiration from the same early Romantic and transcendentalist advocates for nature that led to this appreciation for wilderness. He recognised the value they saw in nature but believed that it could be reproduced in urban settings where more could access it. To build accessible parks Olmsted had to 'soften' transcendentalism (Cranz, 1982: 7) or adopt a 'pastoralized' version of it (Taylor, 1999: 426). This deradicalised aspects of the transcendentalist conception of nature by recognising value in spaces that appeared natural rather than just places that appeared to be untouched by humans. I argue that this aim to increase access anticipated concerns raised by the contemporary environmental justice movement, which has criticised wilderness preservation as an elitist practice (Lee et al., 2023; Powell, 2016: 47; Sene-Harper et al., 2022; Woods 2017: 181–210). Yet, despite this softening, his parks created new justice issues, becoming what Taylor (1999) called new sites of 'social control' over immigrant and working-class urbanites. Reflecting on Olmsted's work illustrates how justice

² <https://www.centralparknyc.org/about>

³ <https://www.nps.gov/grsm/learn/news/second-busiest-year-ever-recorded-at-great-smoky-mountains-national-park-in-2022.htm>

⁴ When I refer to 'natural spaces' here and throughout this work, I mean those spaces designed or maintained in a manner that is meant to appear natural, as are many parks. I am not here interested in the ontological, defining what is or isn't properly called 'nature'.

⁵ I draw heavily from Taylor (1999), an environmental sociologist who engages with ecofeminism. See also Nicholson (2004) on neglect of Olmsted's philosophy and its anticipation of pragmatism. However, neither thinker is an environmental philosopher.

demands more than access to nature's values. It also demands attention to, and input from, different valuers about how they experience and appreciate natural spaces.

Olmsted's axiology, his understanding of nature's essential value, led him to design parks that increased access to nature but excluded certain people. It illustrates a problem with appealing to values independently of valuers, a temptation environmental philosophers face as they reconsider the now thoroughly problematised value of wilderness.⁶ In the second section, I discuss one example of this temptation found in the environmental justice objection to wilderness preservation. Examining Olmsted's parks adds new insight to the wilderness debate: it avoids sticking points about ontology (what is 'real' or 'fake' nature); and it highlights how justice concerns arise from fixing value without considering valuers. By 'fixing value' I mean a rigidification or narrowing of the possible ways of appreciating space, especially through definition or design. In the third section, I examine Olmsted's aesthetic, political and philosophical reasons for pastoralising transcendentalism, and how this adaptation allowed him to both extend and restrict access to natural spaces. In the fourth section, I offer examples of how Olmsted fixed or secured the value of his park spaces through definition and design, and some resulting justice concerns. I conclude with a call to incorporate democracy and procedural justice in assessments of nature's value. More justly distributed access to natural space isn't enough to address elitism. Valuers must also participate in defining values.

[Wilderness, the elitism objection and park space](#)

Wilderness has been a contested concept in environmental philosophy for some time.⁷ Its problematic history is widely acknowledged in environmental thought, especially in the United States where wilderness space was constructed through the violences of genocide, colonialism, displacement,

⁶ For a variety of perspectives on this debate see Callicott and Nelson (1998) and Woods (2017).

⁷ See note above.

assimilation and erasure. The imaginary of empty lands prior to colonialism reinforces the notion of European settler superiority (Denevan, 1992; Spence, 1999; Taylor, 2016). Indigenous people were violently removed from their territories as they became designated wilderness parks (for instance, the Ahwahnechee from Yosemite) to help forge the imaginary of wilderness as untouched nature.

These problems were replicated in urban parks as well. Many parks, including Prospect Park, were built in areas deemed ‘wastelands’ not viable for other kinds of commercial development (Taylor, 1999: 439–440). Often this meant places inhabited by the unemployed, working class, racial minorities or immigrants. Seneca Village, a community of nearly 300 residents – about two-third of whom were of African descent – were forced through eminent domain laws to relocate when New York City built Central Park (Linn et al., 2019: 158). This was a major blow to intergenerational wealth-building since a higher percentage of black residents owned their homes in Seneca Village compared to other parts of the city (Linn et al., 2019: 163) and to political power since voting laws required of Black men a 3-year residency and at least \$250 worth of property (Lee et al., 2023: 1190). While present day wilderness and urban parks both share a problematic history, I here explore a different branch of justice concerns – what I will refer to as the *elitist objection*.

The *elitist objection* runs as follows: environmentalisms overly focused on depopulated wilderness are elitist since the values associated with such wilderness are only appreciated by people in positions of social, economic or political privilege (Woods, 2017: 183).⁸ Woods writes: ‘these elitist values have been criticized for being androcentric, capitalist-centric, class-centric, colonial-centric, ethnocentric, Eurocentric, race-centric and urban-centric’ (Woods, 2017: 183). I take the elitism objection to refer to how people can either access or appreciate nature. For example, wilderness is most often remote. Only

⁸ This objection constitutes a sub-argument in Woods’ account of the larger environmental justice objection to wilderness preservation (2017: 183–91); he devotes a section to responding to elitism (199–203). I don’t reproduce the exact outline of his environmental justice objection here. Rather, I draw from his analysis and supplement it with some of my own examples from the literature.

certain people have the leisure and means necessary to physically travel great distances from their suburbs or cities to visit wilderness areas (Guha, 1989).⁹ Once there, the culturally privileged may appreciate such spaces differently. For instance, others may not feel safe enough to enjoy isolated spaces. Finney proposes a variety of reasons that African Americans haven't engaged as frequently as Anglo-Americans with the outdoors: for example, they may associate such spaces with sites of historical violence (Finney, 2014: 8–9). People of colour, women, queer people and other historically subordinated identities may feel less safe 'where culture's very few restraints on hate crimes will be entirely unloosed' (Gaard, 1997: 9–11). In short, the elitism objection claims that wilderness advocates argue nature should be valued in ways that mostly the elite and privileged members of society are in a position to either access or appreciate.

A response to this objection is that the values it points to are not necessarily connected to wilderness; rather, these objections say more about power dynamics within a hierarchical society (Woods, 2017: 199–200). People who identify as marginalised do in fact visit and appreciate wilderness space. While some accounts of wilderness are ethnocentric, obscuring the presence of indigenous peoples and their histories, they need not be since these are contingent, not essential features. But taking the elitism objection seriously means philosophers should be suspicious of how appeals to essential value can be conditioned by, rather than existing independently of, power dynamics.

Environmental justice scholars have elucidated the elitism objection through decades of theoretical and empirical work both about national and urban parks, some even pointing to Olmsted's designs as examples (Blodgett, 1976; Fisher, 2011; Lee et al., 2023; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Taylor, 1999; Thacher, 2015). This literature is far too vast to summarise thoroughly here but considers some examples. Studies document how US parks were built and managed by white elites, and how the

⁹ Once there it takes special knowledge to remain safe – e.g., how to avoid getting lost, how to recognize and avoid dangers, etc. Perhaps even special gear is needed to appreciate a trip to the wilderness (Woods, 2017: 190).

rhetoric of park advocacy disguised their interests in shaping and maintaining these spaces to reinforce their privileged status over working-class, immigrant and BIPOC communities (Lee et al., 2023). Others highlight the considerable political overlap between those who advocated for preserving wilderness, and those who advocated for eugenics or immigration restrictions securing wilderness as a ‘White space’ (Finney, 2014; Powell, 2016; Sene-Harper et al., 2022). Race and ethnicity are linked to both how much urban park space one can easily access (Boone et al., 2009), and whether that space is perceived as healthy, safe or well maintained (Low et al., 2005; Snaith and Odedun, 2023). Yet the response to the elitism objection offered above suggests that it’s still possible to separate the essential values of such spaces from the historically contingent practices of valuing them. Rather, I suggest we should carefully examine the ways in which the powerful secure certain values at the expense of others *by appealing to essential values*; how injustice can be baked into an axiology. Olmsted’s parks offer an interesting case study.

In the next section, I argue Olmsted anticipated some of the elitism concerns mentioned above. His designs aimed to make parks more accessible. He recognised that few had the means to leave cities but believed his parks could reproduce natural values within their reach. To do so, he had to softened transcendentalist notions of nature. Yet at the same time Olmsted aimed to increase access, his design choices led to new concerns about injustice. These concerns centre around the question of who has the power to fix natural value and displace values recognised by other valuers. Focus on designed park space rather than depopulated wilderness bypasses questions about what nature is and why it’s intrinsically valuable.¹⁰ Parks are carefully designed spaces by talented landscape architects who select everything

¹⁰ See for instance Elliot (1982) and Katz (2003, 2012) who argue, respectively, that human fingerprints or blueprints destroy part of nature’s value. These thinkers inherited with Olmsted transcendentalist ideals about nature, though Elliot and Katz would not hesitate to call Olmsted’s parks ‘fake nature’. This doesn’t present a problem for my argument since I’m not concerned with defending a notion of ‘real nature’, but with the justice concerns that arise from fixing value. Fixing value, whether intrinsic, essential or extrinsic/instrumental, can lead to justice concerns. For a distinction between these types of values, see McShane (2007).

from the kinds of plantings to the gradation of pathways. In well-designed spaces, these selections are invisible; they appear 'natural'. Rather than asking whether nature is intrinsically valuable or why, I want to centre the question: whose values are reflected in the practices of designing and preserving natural spaces?

Olmsted and the value of parks

Romantics and transcendentalists influenced Olmsted and the urban park movement,¹¹ as well as the wilderness movement. Rather commonplace now, it is easy to forget how radical their ideas of nature were when they appeared in the mid-19th century (Cronon, 1996). They inverted the long-established hierarchy of civilisation over nature. Nature became a marker for purity, individuality, freedom and the divine, offering transformative aesthetic experiences. Civilisation corrupted these ideals. Early advocates for parks rejected this latter claim and saw advantages to urbanisation. Olmsted drew from both camps and attempted to reconcile these two contrary notions in his own work by 'softening' transcendentalism.

Parks as moral infrastructure

Enthusiasm for building parks was supported by the belief that they would lead to moral improvement. Olmsted attributes the enthusiasm for the park movement to Andrew Downing's writings in *The Horticulturalist* (Olmsted, 1881: 336).¹² This magazine, first published about a decade before construction on Central Park began, combined landscaping and botanical advice alongside philosophical reflection on the aesthetics, purposes and values of landscape design. Downing's philosophy drew connections between the home, morality and good citizenship. In an article titled 'On the Moral

¹¹ Olmsted was familiar with the works of Emerson, Lowell and Ruskin (Stevenson, 1977: 27). He cited these figures in his writing on multiple occasions (Olmsted, 1881: 345, 1886a: 477, 478, 480). Further, he was indirectly influenced by some of his mentors who engaged with their work (Stevenson, 1977: 40). Olmsted developed his park style drawing from a wide variety of influences, including his experiences as a farmer and travelling abroad (Stevenson, 1977: 5, 6). Here I focus primarily on adaptations of transcendentalists ideas since these roots are shared with the wilderness debate.

¹² Downing convinced Calvert Vaux to emigrate to the United States and introduced him to Olmsted. Vaux and Olmsted went on to design many projects together, including both Central Park and Prospect Park.

Influence of Good Houses', he commends the attention given to aesthetic details in the then contemporary style of building and maintaining American houses, which had a positive impact on the community:

...he who gives to the public a more beautiful and tasteful model of a habitation than his neighbours is a benefactor to the cause of morality, good order, and the improvement of society where he lives. (Downing, 1848: 118)

He believed parks also contributed to these benefits. Within a few years of founding his magazine, he began petitioning for New York City to build a public park. Olmsted was greatly inspired by Downing and his ideas.

Olmsted was also influenced by his family minister, Horace Bushnell, a well-known liberal theologian who likewise began publicly advocating for parks. In his philosophical writings, Bushnell rejected some nominalist strains of Lockean empiricism, however, he agreed with Locke that language left much room for erroneous judgements about the world (Menard, 2010: 515). Good infrastructure encourages every member of society to properly build connections between ideas within their minds, which led in turn to proper virtues. He writes on the positive effects of good city planning (infrastructure, especially roads) on morality (Bushnell, 1881; Menard, 2010: 516). Olmsted took advantage of enthusiasm for natural beauty, articulated so well by Romantic and transcendentalist writers, alongside Downing's and Bushnell's work to help advocate for the expansion of parks as necessary to sustain the moral integrity of developing cities.

Olmsted's own writings and public lectures were another essential part of the park movement in North America. He cited the widespread and 'spontaneous' demand for park space as evidence that the Romantics and transcendentalists were right: in an age that 'grows more and more artificial day by day', he says quoting John Ruskin, so too grows the need to access natural spaces for the sake of physical and psychological wellbeing (Olmsted, 1881: 345). Yet, he believed that the transcendentalists were wrong in

their suspicions about urban life corrupting human nature. In fact, he saw urban life by and large as a liberatory force for positive social change, an attitude he developed during his tour of the South and his first-hand experiences with chattel slavery (Menard, 2010: 509).¹³ Park spaces therefore became a necessary part of any urban 'infrastructure' for the sake of the physical, moral and political wellbeing of American society.¹⁴ Cities needed parks, and the progress of justice was furthered by cities.

Integrating immigrants into democratic American culture was a central aspect of this wellbeing, according to both Bushnell and Olmsted. The easing of class tensions was another. Public urban parks provide space for people of different classes and backgrounds to mingle, consider one another as equals, and even appreciate each other's presence (Olmsted, 1870: 186). Such mingling was thought to ease class and cultural tensions by promoting free association of both ideas and people (Menard, 2010: 536). Though quite often it did the opposite and even exacerbated tensions between working class visitors (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992: 237; Taylor, 1999: 427–428).

Finally, it's worth noting that Olmsted knew his clients were worried about returns on their investments and that Romantic arguments about natural beauty, or utilitarian arguments about political duty, would not alone persuade cities to invest in parks. Olmsted claimed that parks would help preserve the 'wealth-producing and tax-bearing capacity' of citizens by staving off the 'nervous irritation' and other forms of 'vital exhaustion' that transcendentalist helped associate with urban life (Olmsted, 1881: 345).

Downing believed entry fees and private funding could help finance parks, while Olmsted and other park

¹³ Olmsted toured the antebellum American South documenting the evils of chattel slavery and its effects on economy, infrastructure and people. He published reports on his travels in the *Daily-Times* and the *Herald*, which were later worked into three volumes and in 1862 condensed into a single volume, *The Cotton Kingdom* (Stevenson, 1977: 116–117).

¹⁴ Here the literal meaning of infrastructure is extended. Olmsted believed parks, like roads, became a necessary part of a well-functioning city. However, this extended meaning should not be confused with how landscape architecture could be infrastructure in the more traditional sense, such as Boston's Bay Back Fens, which Olmsted designed to serve as part of the city's drainage systems (Olmsted, 1886b). (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this clarification.)

advocates were sceptical of these strategies (Olmsted, 1865, 1895: 313; Taylor, 1999: 431–432). Olmsted argued that parks should remain public, free, and thus, accessible by all.

Transforming transcendentalism

Even though he rejected transcendentalists' disdain for cities, Olmsted shared their appreciation of wilderness spaces. In a commissioner's report on Mariposa Grove, which would become part of Yosemite National Park, Olmsted writes that the area's natural beauty could never be replicated. He describes the scenes admirably and poetically insisting that 'no photograph or series of photographs, no paintings ever prepare a visitor so that he is not taken by surprise' (Olmsted, 1865). Yet, the limits of his appreciation are important for understanding his adaptation of transcendentalism and his aim to increase access to natural spaces.

His notebooks indicate that he found the craggy mountaintops of the Sierras unpleasantly sublime unless they were partially obscured by fog (Beveridge and Hoffman, 1997: 47). While he considered 'distant forms', such as El Capitan, essential elements of scenery, these individual elements had to blend harmoniously into the whole rather than dominate the experience (Beveridge and Hoffman, 1997, 47). He therefore preferred for his urban parks to simulate not wilderness directly, but pastures which he called 'in the highest degree tranquilizing and grateful' (Olmsted, Vaux and Company, 1866: 90).

He insisted the picturesque, harmony within the scene, should guide any park design aesthetics, be it a wilderness or urban park. He believed picturesque natural scenes best promoted the contemplative state of mind that made natural spaces so valuable. He decried the gardenesque park designs pitched by some of his competitors. A picturesque aesthetic was fitting for urban parks since it did not require the elements of wilderness that would have been impractical to reproduce in cities. He writes,

A mere imitation of nature, however successful is not art, and the purpose to imitate nature, or to produce an effect which shall seem to be natural and interesting, is not

sufficient for the duty before us [of designing a city park]. (Olmsted, Vaux and Company, 1866: 89)

Taylor calls Olmsted's interest in replicating not wilderness but pastoral scenes 'transcendental pastoralism', or a muted form of transcendentalism which valorised those natural elements that could be easily reproduced in urban parks (Taylor, 1999: 426). Cranz contrasts this 'softer' transcendentalism of Olmsted with its harder Emersonian form that called for a spiritualised 'attunement with', 'contemplation of' and 'immersion in' nature (Cranz, 1982: 7). Olmsted would settle for contemplation of not nature but natural scenery, which supported, not spiritual but psychological wellbeing.

While parks are useful for many reasons, Olmsted argued that what distinguishes a park essentially from similar sorts of spaces is that parks allow for the contemplation of beautiful natural scenery – that is, the landscape holistically considered – for 'interest in the beauty of nature [alone] may be gratified in a conservatory, a garden, a flower pot or a posey' (Olmsted, Vaux and Company, 1871: 218; Olmsted, 1881: 344–5). The contemplation of scenery induces a state of mind that counteracts the kinds of stresses (psychological and otherwise) that modern urban life induces. He writes:

the enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it, tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system. (Olmsted, 1865)

Although these passages are from his report on Mariposa Grove, Olmsted speaks similarly in a preliminary report on Prospect Park written just one year later (Olmsted, Vaux and Company, 1866: 84–88). He claims that 'the unbending of the faculties' taxed by urban life requires

the occupation of the imagination with objects and reflections of a quite different character from those which are associated with their bent conditions ... And this is what is found by townspeople in a park. (Olmsted, Vaux and Company, 1866: 86–7)

Natural scenery would have to be a paramount design element of parks if they were to sustain urban life, maintaining the health and productivity of the workforce. Olmsted agreed with the transcendentalist

about these positive effects of natural places. He differed from them, however, in his belief that cities were a force for progressive social change worth sustaining.

Artifice for accessibility

Olmsted's softened transcendentalism therefore tolerated more artifice. Rather than distorting the values of wilderness spaces admired by transcendentalists, parks could reproduce, enhance and bring them to more people. Yet this tolerance had limits. He was staunchly against Downing's plans to include instructive labels and memorial statues, which detracted from the restorative state of mind that only parks could produce (Olmsted, 1868: 155; Taylor, 1999: 438). He believed the purpose of parks was

the reconciliation of adequate beauty of nature in scenery with adequate means in artificial constructions of protecting the conditions of such beauty, and holding it available to the use, in a convenient and orderly way, *of those needing it*. (Olmsted, 1881: 346; my emphasis)

Artifice increases physical accessibility, protects designs and, importantly, ensures proper appreciation of the park. He laments that throughout history, the wealthy monopolised beautiful scenery by privatising the space, as in the 18th-century pleasure gardens of Europe, denying access to those who could reap 'the greatest benefit' (Olmsted, 1865).

He claims that it is a 'political duty' to keep such space publicly accessible. In Yosemite, for instance, Olmsted insisted that maintaining the natural scenery should be of paramount concern, but that accommodations for visitors should be constructed so long as they did not 'unnecessarily obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the scenery' (Olmsted, 1865). He recommended accommodations to encourage more women visitors as well as a range of lodging options so that all classes could afford to visit (Olmsted, 1865).¹⁵

¹⁵ Although tolerating more artifice than transcendentalist, Olmsted remained wary of too much artifice that might detract from the scenery. This concern manifests in his discussions of Niagara Falls, which had become overloaded with vendors and other artificial distraction from the natural scenery (Drabelle, 2021: 83–84, 181–184).

This same commitment to access is clear in Olmsted's mission to build more city parks, where artifice and management are often disguised (Spirn, 1996: 95; Thacher, 2015: 592). Many who visit his parks suppose their 'natural' features existed as they are before the architect arrived.¹⁶ While this is sometimes true, each element is carefully considered to create an aesthetic experience that directs parkgoers to the 'contemplation of beauty in natural scenery' (Olmsted, 1881: 345).

In sum, Olmsted did not view 'untouched wilderness' as an ideal model for parks. He believed that landscape architects could improve upon nature's values through design. He designed his parks to be accessible *to those needing them*. Yet, they ran aground on the same elitism objections faced by wilderness advocates who share those transcendentalist roots in part because he understood scenery to be their essential value, and his designs centred and fixed that value.

Before proceeding, it's worth noting that the 'progressive' description of Olmsted in this section is certainly a source of contention within the literature, as I mean to demonstrate in the next section. Many of his biographers and editors are quick to sing his praises. He was called one of the 'pioneering advocates of social justice' of his day for his democratisation of free and widely accessible public park space (Twombly 2010: 34). They note how he supported (gradual) emancipation and donated to antislavery newspapers (Rybczynski, 1999: 106, 133–134) and how he thought parks were both a symbol and facilitator of democracy (Shutkin, 1995: 582). Thus, his parks were dubbed a 'democratic artistry [that] is unrivalled' (Roulier, 2018: 100). But others point out problems with his notion of democracy. It presumed a 'trained and cultivated leadership' (Blodgett, 1976: 870) primarily to promote the interests of wealthy citizens (Fisher, 2011; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992) by checking, supervising, and even educating working class and immigrant populations (Taylor, 1999; Thacher, 2015).¹⁷ My aim is not to

¹⁶ Naturalists at the time were more sensitive to the human touch. They railed against the artificially landscaped areas and insisted that wild nature offered a distinct and preferable aesthetic (Cranz, 1982: 26).

¹⁷ Though for a generally sympathetic attempt to reconcile these tensions, and how he also monitored wealthy parkgoers, see Roulier (2018).

demonstrate that Olmsted himself was an elitist but rather examine how his understanding of nature's value encouraged elitism, despite his 'progressive' intentions. I begin with his definition of a park's essence. I return to democracy in the final section.

Fixing value: Definition, discipline and defiance

Olmsted was incredibly defensive about how his park spaces should be appreciated. His anxiety manifested in two ways: first through his concern with the definition of a park, and second through his strict policing of his parks. Just as the Romantics and transcendentalists worked to reinscribe positive values on depopulated wilderness spaces, Olmsted believed people required instruction on properly appreciating parks.

Defining parks

Olmsted repeatedly returns to the definition of parks in various writings and lectures.¹⁸ He thought common uses of the term were inconsistent, meaningless and sometimes even harmful. He writes: 'Our large town parks are public trusts, so loosely defined as to fix no clear limits as to the use which may be legitimately or honourably made of the lands, materials, funds, or official "influence", which belongs to them' ([Olmsted, 1881](#): 331). He notes his relief for a bill introduced, and later passed, in 1881 by New York to define and restrict the use of parks. This happened not long after Central Park was removed from the list of potential hosts for the 1883 World's Fair. He feared the fair would compromise his designs and harm his work ([Olmsted, 1881](#): 331). Legal definitions could protect the integrity of park designs.

Olmsted was especially dissatisfied with the public conception of parks as places for recreation. He thought parks should include such places, but he worried about its ambiguous meaning ([Olmsted, 1881](#):

¹⁸ He delivered a lecture before the American Social Science Association in 1880 reflecting on the essence of parks which he later published in the *Journal of Science* as 'A Consideration of The Justifying Value of a Public Park'. He continued to write about this issue at least until 1894 in a letter to Joseph Carew, then-president of the Cincinnati Park Commission (Olmsted, 1881: 345).

341).¹⁹ He made a distinction between ‘exertive recreation’ (e.g. ballplaying) and ‘receptive recreation’ (e.g. picnicking) and understood that both contribute to the healthy functioning of urban democracies (Olmsted, 1870: 184–190). But as the public understood it, recreation could be had anywhere: in theatres or flower gardens (Olmsted, 1868: 148). Parks alone allow for the contemplation of carefully arranged natural scenery, which reinvigorates the mind assaulted by the struggles of urban life (Olmsted, 1881: 344–345). Recreation had its place in the overall design and function of a park, but it was best contained to defined spaces lest it interfere with this other essential value of parks.

Discipline by design

Urbanites had physical access to Olmsted’s parks, but not all parkgoers appreciated them in accordance with his designs. He suggested two reasons why. First, the ‘power of scenery to affect men is in a large way, proportionate to their degree of civilization and to the degree in which their tastes have been cultivated’ (Olmsted, 1865). He believed the citizens of New York varied greatly in these attributes, especially the working-class immigrant population. Second, city parks were a new type of public space, even more so for people from non-urban environments. In each case, people would ‘need to be trained to the proper use of [park space]’ and ‘restrained in the abuse of it’ (Olmsted, 1857: 58). Taken together, these assumptions raise concerns of elitism since they restrict appreciation of the parks to values recognised by people who could define and protect them.

Thousands of visitors winding through pathways and isolated pockets of large parks were difficult to monitor (Thacher, 2015: 588). Therefore, Olmsted’s designs incorporated ‘keepers’, an experimental police force organised and (at various times) controlled by him (Thacher, 2015: 581), inspired by trips to

¹⁹ Earlier, Olmsted had placed exercise and recreation as the primary purpose of Central Park (Olmsted, 1859: 212–213), though we see his ideas shift in the later writings cited in this section.

consult with various police agencies in Europe (Thacher, 2015: 586–589). Olmsted believed that visitors were ignorant, rather than malicious (Thacher, 2015: 578, 581–582).

While the municipal police might interfere with the atmosphere of his parks, Keepers ‘taught’ parkgoers that appropriating a public flower for private use was a crime, albeit unintentional.²⁰ In his order outlining the purpose and duties of his keepers, Olmsted insisted that every element of the park ‘has been fixed where it is *with a purpose*’ and that keepers are there to protect the value associated with that purpose fixed by the designer (Olmsted, 1873: 299; emphasis original).²¹ Quite often, this amounted to restricting activities that compromised the scenery. Olmsted sought positions of authority that would extend his control over monitoring park use, including but not limited to supervision of his keepers. He was the first superintendent of Central Park. He oversaw management for about 20 years on and off, a task he took perhaps too seriously. The park commissioners ultimately revoked his authority over the keepers after intense criticism of the overly militaristic demands he made of them (Taylor, 1999: 447).²²

Although urban working class and immigrant populations now had physical access to natural spaces, they were ‘instructed’ to appreciate such spaces in ways that reflected values consistent with what urban, middle-class American elites hoped to sustain; represented not just by Olmsted, but also the governing boards who managed the park. Contemplation of scenery, not recreation, defined the essence of parks. Keepers made sure to protect that scenery from activity that might threaten it. Often it was working class and immigrant parkgoers who resisted these values by rejecting scenery as paramount and pushing for more social recreation space (Taylor, 1999).

²⁰ Keepers wrote citations and even made arrests for a variety of violations in Central Park’s first year, including for drunkenness, battery, vagrancy and insanity (Taylor, 1999: 445). However, over the first decade, arrests were more common for speeding or damaging the landscape (Thacher, 2015: 594).

²¹ See this article’s epigraph for the full quote.

²² Olmsted defined ‘beat’ and ‘round’ duties, how long each round circuiting the park should take and how much time was allowed for rest: ‘At 6:50 a.m. the second half of the keepers of the morning section are to report to duty at the station; at 6:55 the first is to be sent out, and the others in succession at regular intervals, dividing the time till 8:20 a.m. (85 minutes) by the number of keepers ready for duty (Olmsted, 1873: 281–307, esp. 285)’.

Defying designs

In the 1860s the working-class made up only one-eighth of the total visitors to Central Park for a number of reasons: it was difficult to get to the park without time, money or transportation; policies disfavoured their preferred activities (e.g., large picnics were banned within the first year, leading many immigrant visitors to rent space from the more tolerant, but private Jones Woods); and the elite establish social norms which made them feel unwelcome (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992: 6, 215, 232, 237, 251–252).

This trend continues today. A 1996 study found that appreciation of Prospect Park varied by race. Black parkgoers were more likely to appreciate the park as a place for association (Low et al., 2005: 52), or ‘receptive recreation’. People of colour picnicked and held social activities more frequently (Low et al., 2005: 57). A tall gate blocks access from neighbourhoods on the eastern border today, which are poorer and less White than those on the west. Black and Hispanic visitors perceived ‘their’ (east) side as neglected: denser trees make social gatherings difficult. By contrast, the park’s White, affluent, west side, bordered only by a low, easily circumvented wall hosts the Long Meadow, ball fields and picnic areas. Perceived as injustice, the thick planting is by design, not neglect (Low et al., 2005: 63).²³

Prospect Park’s main entrance at Grand Army Plaza was designed to lead to the vast Long Meadow – a scenic highlight six times larger than Central Park’s Sheep Meadow, once a contender for the largest continuous urban park space in America (Martin, 1990). Olmsted wanted visitors at the Meadow to forget they were in a city and enjoy the pastoral scenery. To create this effect, Olmsted enhanced natural hills and planted them with trees to insulate the Long Meadow from noisy Flatbush Avenue, the park’s eastern border, once a busy elevated pathway (Graff, 1985: 113). This buffer zone – originally called the ‘Children’s Playground’ (later the ‘Rose Garden’)²⁴ then the ‘Vale of Cashmere’ – has challenged Olmsted

²³ Olmsted intended to trim these trees to improve the view, however, the public (sometimes violently) protested this ‘interference with nature’. Managers later changed the official policy to align with popular opinion (Spirn, 1996; Low et al., 2005: 63–64).

²⁴ The area has been renamed and redesigned several times. A part was recently retitled the Rose Garden.

and park managers from the beginning. To reach the Vale, visitors must resist the architectural flow towards the Long Meadow, head east and navigate winding pathways designed for contemplation. Few end up in the Vale unintentionally even today (Graff, 1985: 140). It's always been considered underutilised – children didn't even go to the Children's Playground in the 19th century (Graff, 1985: 142). Three broken lily fountains, reportedly turned on just once in the 1960s, remain empty today. It appears neglected and poorly maintained, but it preserves the aesthetic of the Long Meadow.

The Vale is just one example from one area of a single park. Environmental justice scholarship (cited throughout this article) documents a history of the elite creating and preserving natural spaces that reflect their values and the numerous justice concerns that arise from such practices. A study of Olmsted's axiology (his writings on nature's value and how parks could enhance that value) shows this outcome is not historically contingent, but that privilege conditions reflections on essential values. If this is true, it has bearing on axiological discussions of wilderness as well as parks. The best check against elitism is not to double-down on identifying essential values, but on democratising such evaluation of natural spaces.

Democracy and value

Olmsted softened transcendentalism by giving up on its commitment to a hard disjunct between the natural and the artificial, thereby permitting construction of parks to reproduce the values of nature within cities. Although there was no elitism objection of his day, his work intended to allow more people to access natural spaces. He insisted parks remain public and free (against objections from peers). He understood his work to be, among other things, in the service of progress, justice and democracy. Despite all this, he defined parks by, and fiercely protected, their scenery and the state of mind it induced. This guided his design choices and excluded other ways of valuing the space. Today Olmsted's designs are legally protected from change. In 1975, the New York City Landmarks Preservation

Commission designated Prospect Park a scenic landmark. The Vale is one area noted in the designation (NYCLPC, 1975). Elitism concerns today must contend with these past commitments. Noble intentions about increasing access to the essential value of nature are not enough to address elitism. It also manifests when values are fixed, unilaterally, to preclude other values considered inessential. Addressing elitism requires examining not just values, but also valuers and the power relations that exist between them in a hierarchical society.

Woods argues that competing interests for wilderness parks (between elites and others) is no different from competition for any other public good; it's up to policy makers to 'balance things out' (Woods, 2017: 201). Yet when some values are protected as essential to wilderness or other natural spaces then, by implication, others are inessential or extrinsic. This can distort discussions that focus only on distributing set values. An environmental justice framework – engaging with concepts from Iris Young, John Rawls, and other political philosophers – advocates for a multidimensional approach to justice, which can include procedural, recognitive, and corrective justice as an addition to distributive justice (Boone et al, 2009; Lee et al., 2023; Low, 2013). These commitments run in stark contrast with the type of managerial democracy which Olmsted favoured. Focusing on distribution alone can lead to inequity,²⁵ yet, as is the case within political theory, distributive justice is over-represented in the environmental justice literature, while studies invoking procedural justice are lacking (Lee et al., 2023: 1186). Just procedures include the community in a democratic process of defining values, and periodically reshaping designs rather than leaving the task to elites with noble intentions. In the context of parks, recognitive justice, or interactional justice as Low calls it, refers to how the values that a variety of visitors hold about a space are reflected in norms and designs – how well different valuers are respected as valid park visitors and how their values are recognised by those who use and manage the space. Thoroughly

²⁵ For instance, Low (2013). Boone et al. (2009) discuss how a legacy of decisions by various public and private institutions lead to inequitable (not merely unequal) access to park space for Black residents of Baltimore.

democratic processes that recognise equally the plurality of values held by the community ensures that some values aren't marginalised as inessential. Likewise, when other values are deemed non-negotiable, they may not make it to the discussion table.

For example, in 2010 and 2012 storms destroyed parts of the Vale. This created an opportunity for park managers to reconsider the space's value. Federal money was secured to restore the area to its woodland design.²⁶ Sensitive to some of the concerns mentioned above, park managers hired an urban planning firm to help reimagine the space once more (Prospect Park Alliance, 2018), in a gesture of corrective justice (Lee et al., 2023). After a 6-month consultation with the community, the area will once again become the Rose Garden. An official entrance will be opened along the gated eastern border. However, these community-favoured changes to Olmsted's protected designs still had to be approved by the Landmark Preservation Commission to ensure, for instance, that they won't 'disrupt any prominent vistas' (NYCLPC, 2017).

My point is not that any one way of appreciating natural space is superior. It is not that use always exceeds the intentions of the designer. Nor is it to accuse Olmsted of being an elitist. Rather, my claim is that fixing the value of natural spaces, securing how such spaces are appreciated, can result in a form of environmental injustice, even despite the designer's best intentions. This is true of both urban parks and wilderness spaces, regardless of which is the better representation of what nature *really* is. Both appeal to designs and definitions to secure what some (often the privileged) have presumed valuable about such space *to the exclusion of* how others (often the marginalised) appreciate the space. Excluding people from participating in defining values themselves is an important element of the elitism objection. It is distinct from lacking physical access. Citing essential value alone cannot obviate the need to examine power relations, or for how natural spaces are valued differently by different social groups depending on

²⁶ <https://www.prospectpark.org/news-events/news/goats-have-arrived/>

their needs. An appeal to an overriding value, essential or otherwise, to deny those needs is a form of environmental injustice disguised by focus on axiology.

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