

Olmsted's life, legacy fuel enduring fascination

Landscape architect subject of a new film



The woodland, water, and pasture enjoyed at Jamaica Pond are features that landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted worked into his designs. (David L. Ryan/Globe Staff)

By [Laura Collins-Hughes](#)

Globe Staff / April 29, 2011

There is a story about Frederick Law Olmsted near the end of his life, when the visionary landscape architect was in his 70s and suffering from dementia. It goes like this.

Admitted to McLean Hospital in Belmont for psychiatric care in the late 1890s, the famous man would walk the grounds in agitation, upset that the campus was not as he had designed it to be more than two decades earlier. “They didn’t carry out my plan, confound them!” he is said to have exclaimed.

On the story’s accuracy, experts differ. But the anecdote’s staying power reflects an enduring fascination with the architect, who designed Boston’s Emerald Necklace, is best known for creating New York’s Central Park, and spent his last years at McLean, dying there in 1903. He is the subject of an admiring new documentary, “Olmsted and

America's Urban Parks,' which makes its local broadcast premiere tonight at 8 on WGBH's Channel 44.

The film is filled with talking heads, many of them from the Boston area, who have devoted years to promoting, protecting, and restoring Olmsted landscapes so that, even in the 21st century, they are as much as possible the way he intended them to be.

"They are our landscape artwork," Belmont landscape historian Arleyn Levee said in an interview. A specialist in the work of the Olmsted firm and a past president of the National Association for Olmsted Parks, she appears in the documentary. "This has been my mantra: You protect the things in the museum. You need to protect the things in the museum en plein air."

The movie, which features the architect's words spoken by the actor Kevin Kline, explores the life and legacy of Olmsted, who moved his family and his booming practice to Brookline from New York in 1883.

"He found the work up here to be a lot more satisfying, in terms of the people he was interacting with," Alan Banks, another face from the film, said recently.

Banks is the supervisory park ranger at Fairsted, the Olmsted home and design office on Warren Street that is now the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. "The people in Boston were a lot more sympathetic to what he was trying to do."

What he was trying to do, in part, was to bring about greener, healthier cities, where people from all walks of life, not only the wealthy, could enjoy the relaxation afforded by nature. His landscapes mimicked pastoral settings; their woodlands, water, and fields were calculated to soothe the psyches of urban dwellers.

"The grand irony, I think, of his whole life was that he created these spaces where people who were overworked . . . could go and find peace," said Rebecca Messner, the documentary's 25-year-old writer and producer, "and he himself was such a workaholic that I don't know how much time he spent relaxing in the park." http://www.boston.com/yourtown/belmont/articles/2011/04/29/olmsteds_life_legal_fuel_enduring_fascination?page=2

A Hartford native, Olmsted was a journalist and a gentleman farmer before he segued into design in 1858, teaming with Calvert Vaux to create Central Park. The duo, who pioneered the field of landscape architecture, parted ways in 1872.

For Olmsted, the theory behind the designs was always of paramount importance, said Messner, whose documentary is the brainchild of her father, Michael Messner, its executive producer.

A New Jersey hedge fund manager, he heads an initiative called Red Fields to Green Fields, which aims to buy financially distressed properties, some for conversion into public parks, some for development adjacent to the parks.

Key to Olmsted's philosophy, Rebecca Messner said, is the idea that "every citizen has a right to a little green space." In the crowded, rapidly growing cities of the 19th-century United States, that was not a notion in general circulation.

"He was one of the first people who said, 'Stop for a minute and think about where we're going,'" Banks said.

In 1878, when a coalition of civic leaders and entrepreneurs brought Olmsted to Boston to begin work on the Emerald Necklace, he was able at last to create something he and Vaux had hoped to make in New York, Levee said: a series of parks linked through a city, enhancing the surrounding neighborhoods with greenery. With the Muddy River a polluted swamp prone to flooding, the project had public health and engineering aspects, as well.

"This park system, it was the first urban greenbelt in America," said former governor Michael S. Dukakis, who also appears in the film. A member of the Emerald Necklace Conservancy's board of directors, Dukakis said in an interview that he regularly picks up litter as he passes through the Necklace on the 2-mile walk from his home in Brookline to his office in Northeastern University's political science department.

Dukakis, who said he is "slightly obsessive about this," recalled various perils that have threatened the Emerald Necklace in the past half-century, like the scheme in the 1950s and '60s to turn the Fenway Victory Gardens, part of the Back Bay Fens, into a Red Sox parking lot, and the 1960s master highway plan that would have put an eight-lane expressway right through the Necklace.

Those were the bad old days for Olmsted parks across the country. It was only in the late 1970s, with the parks in disrepair, that advocates in various cities banded together to learn about and protect the Olmsted legacy, Levee said.

Olmsted's practice was a collaborative enterprise that long outlived him and employed numerous designers. The thousands of projects the firm undertook in more than 40 states and several other countries — more of them in Massachusetts than anywhere else — include the grounds of hospitals, schools, churches, businesses, cemeteries, and more.

"It kind of was a cradle-to-grave operation," Banks said. "From birth to death, you could live in an Olmsted landscape."

But was Olmsted, in McLean Hospital at the end of his life, living in what had been intended to be an Olmsted landscape? Evidence is murky.

As a history on the hospital's website explains, between 1872 and 1874, the McLean Asylum for the Insane commissioned Olmsted and a civil engineer "to conduct site surveys and to report on a suitable site for the building of a new asylum."

Olmsted recommended the Belmont site, with its rolling terrain, woodland, and vistas, Levee said, and it was there that the renamed McLean Hospital opened in 1895, moving from its original location in Somerville. But the extent of involvement by Olmsted and his firm is uncertain, possibly because records have been lost, she said.

So what of the famed story about Olmsted's late-in-life distress over alterations to his McLean design?

"That, I'm sorry to say, . . . is apocryphal," Levee said. "We all would like to have come across that document, but we haven't."

Messner, who took the anecdote from the late Laura Wood Roper's well-regarded "FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted," bowed to Levee's expertise. "Arleyn is far better versed in all this than I am," she wrote in an e-mail, "so if you had to take one of us at our word, I'd pick her!"

What's certain, Messner said, is that Olmsted by 1895 feared "ending his days at a place like McLean."

In a letter excerpted in Witold Rybczynski's biography, "A Clearing in the Distance," Olmsted wrote: "You cannot think how I have been dreading that it would be thought expedient that I should be sent to an 'institution.' Anything but that."

"Olmsted and America's Urban Parks" airs tonight at 8 on WGBH's Channel 44 and Sunday at 2 p.m. on WGBH's Channel 2. Collins-Hughes can be reached at collins-hughes@globe.com. ■

© Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.