

Detroit's Belle Isle, Frederick Law Olmsted and popular access to culture

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In his talk this summer, “The defense of culture and the crisis in Detroit,” WSWS arts editor David Walsh noted that “popular access to culture was a product of social revolution, in this country (above all, the Civil War) and globally,” and that the “destruction of the slavocracy was seen as a blow against the aristocratic principle. ... The generation, the population that emerged from the Civil War, which had gone through tremendous hardships to defend the Union and defeat slavery, was hungry for knowledge, progress, culture.”

Frederick Law Olmsted—America’s foremost landscape architect—was guided by such sentiments in creating the original 1883 design for Detroit’s Belle Isle Park, which, like the masterpieces in the Detroit Institute of Arts, has been sized up by politicians and the financial elite for sale or liquidation. Disgustingly, developer Rodney Lockwood has proposed, for example, to buy Belle Isle for \$1 billion and “turn the island into a private city-state with a focus on free market capitalism and limited government.” (CBS Detroit)

The 983-acre island is the largest municipal island park in the US and has been enjoyed by generations of city residents, although budget cuts have resulted in serious deterioration. In addition to Olmsted’s design, which was never fully realized, the island boasts Scott Fountain, designed by Cass Gilbert, and the Albert Kahn-designed Whitcomb Conservatory.

Olmsted (1822-1903), born in Hartford, Connecticut, began his astonishing career as a landscape architect with the design for Central Park in New York City in 1857. In the course of the next four decades—interrupted only by his direction of the US Sanitary Commission (a forerunner of the Red Cross) during the Civil War—he and his firm designed some of the most beautiful and enduring public spaces in the US and Canada, including scores of public parks, nature reserves, college campuses and grounds of government buildings.

It is not possible in this article to list all of these, but of particular note are public park systems in Milwaukee and Buffalo, Mount Royal Park in Montreal, Highland Park in Rochester, the Emerald Necklace in Boston, the University of California, Berkeley, Stanford University, Cornell University, the University of Chicago and Trinity College campuses, Niagara Falls State Park and the grounds around the US Capitol building in Washington. The list goes on and on.

The democratic spirit at work in Olmsted’s designs, like that of many of his generation, arose from his political experiences and especially the struggle against slavery. According to historian Charles E. Beveridge, “From his New England heritage [Olmsted] drew a belief in community and the importance of public institutions of culture and education. His southern travels and friendship with exiled participants in the failed German revolutions of 1848 convinced him of the need for the United States to demonstrate the superiority of republican government and free labor.”

Olmsted’s opposition to the aristocratic principle was crystallized by his work as a journalist before the Civil War, when he produced one of the more penetrating and enduring analyses of the Old South in his first-hand *Journeys and Explorations in the Cotton Kingdom*. In a remarkable passage, Olmsted described the damaging effect on culture and public life that the extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of the Southern slavocracy engendered.

“It is hardly worthwhile to build much of a bridge for the occasional use of two families, even if they are rich. It is less worthwhile to go to much pains in making six miles of good road for the use of these families. A school-house will hardly be built for the children of six rich men,” he wrote. “[I]f all the wealth produced in a certain district is concentrated in the hands of a few men living remote from each other, it may possibly bring to the

district comfortable houses, good servants, fine wines, food and furniture, tutors and governesses, horses and carriages, for these few men, but it will not bring thither good roads and bridges, it will not bring thither such means of education and of civilized comfort as are to be drawn from libraries, churches, museums, gardens, theatres, and assembly rooms.”

This description of the Southern oligarchy in its last days would, with only minor changes, also fit today’s financial aristocracy, whose attitude toward museums, libraries, schools, and indeed infrastructure, is similar. These are either to be sold, privatized or left to rot.

In his landscape architecture, Olmsted opposed the private ownership of natural treasures. In a report to a commission appointed in 1865 to oversee the transfer of Yosemite Park and Mariposa Grove from federal authority to the State of California, Olmsted said the following:

“Men who are rich enough and who are sufficiently free from anxiety with regard to their wealth can and do provide places of this needed recreation for themselves. ... There are in the islands of Great Britain and Ireland more than one thousand private parks and notable grounds devoted to luxury and recreation. The value of these grounds amounts to many millions of dollars and the cost of their annual maintenance is greater than that of the national schools; their only advantage to the commonwealth is obtained through the recreation they afford to their owners ... less than one in six thousand of the whole population. ... The great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it.”

And further: “It has always been the conviction of the governing classes of the old world that it is necessary that the large mass of all human communities should spend their lives in almost constant labor and that the power of enjoying beauty either of nature or of art in any high degree, requires a cultivation of certain faculties, which is impossible to these humble toilers.”

Olmsted rejected this, and warned that if measures were not taken to protect such spaces “from the grasp” of such wealthy individuals, “all places favorable in scenery to the recreation of the mind and body will be closed against the great body of the people. ... The establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people under certain circumstances, is thus justified and enforced as a political duty.”

Olmsted’s egalitarian convictions infused his landscapes. He sought to create an overall aesthetic

experience that would have a largely subconscious influence on the individual. For this reason he subordinated decorative detail to the whole. The proposed park would have “an effect on the human organism by an action of what it presents to view, which action, like that of music, is of a kind that goes back of thought, and cannot be fully given the form of words.” This Olmsted called “the elegance of design.”

He also insisted on adapting a given space to the nature of the region, rather than imposing curiosities, for example imported ornamental plants. The purpose was instead to unlock and exalt “the genius of place,” as Olmsted called it. His creations were meticulously studied in the detail, with light, perspective, reflection, boundaries, layering and contour developed through the lush use of plants and pre-existing natural features. But Olmsted’s designs did not have the *feel* of being studied. They felt natural.

Architect Daniel Burnham said of Olmsted, “An artist, he paints with lakes and wooded slopes; with lawns and banks and forest covered hills; with mountain sides and ocean views.”

(This brings to mind Trotsky’s remarks in *Literature and Revolution* that in socialist society humanity will “point out places for mountains and for passes,” will “change the course of the rivers,” will “lay down rules for the oceans” and will “do it so well that the tiger won’t even notice the machine, or feel the change, but will live as he lived in primeval times.”)

Olmsted sought in all his designs to make nature accessible to everyone, regardless of wealth. He wrote, “It is one great purpose of the Park to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God’s handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month or two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances.”



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