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From *Frederick Law Olmsted: Writings on Landscape, Culture, and Society*  
(The Library of America, 2015), pages 587–94.

Originally published in *The Sanitarian* (September 1882).

Reprinted in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, volume VIII:  
*The Early Boston Years, 1882–1890* (2013). Used by arrangement with  
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“THE HIGHEST VALUE OF A PARK”: SEPTEMBER 1882

*Trees in Streets and in Parks\**

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED

I am looking upon a crooked, hill-side village street, lined with trees. I was about to say beautiful trees. But this may be questionable, for I have a book on my table which says with distinguished authority that nature is not beautiful, the word being applicable, in the opinion of the author, only to matters of design,<sup>†</sup> and it occurs to me that what is of design in these trees cannot be called beautiful. It is not symmetrical; it is not stately; it is not picturesque. A part of the trees crowd upon the gutter, a part upon the sidewalk so that two wayfarers can hardly pass between them and the fence. Soon a decision must be forced whether they shall be cut away, the street widened or the passage abandoned. The sidewalk is laid with tar-concrete on a base of stone; the gutter and wheel-way are laid a foot deep with road-metal. Were moisture, air and mould of vegetation to be carefully kept from the roots, the arrangement could be little improved. The trees are, indeed, so poorly fed that others nearby of the same species and of the same age are nearly twice as large. Everyone bears great scars from wounds

\*From a letter written by request on the subject and read in abstract before the National Association for Sanitary and Rural Improvement, at Warwick Woodlands, N.J., July 10, 1882.

<sup>†</sup>*Art in Ornament*, by Charles Blanc, Member of the Institute of France, and formerly Director of Fine Arts.

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and mutilations, which a little care would have avoided. Several show dead wood. Having been challenged to find a perfectly thrifty and sound tree among hundreds, I pointed to one of extraordinary beauty. Upon examination I had to acknowledge that it was of spontaneous growth, taking by chance a position in which the line and grade of the street could be accommodated to it, and that it obtained its sustenance neither from tar-concrete nor broken stone, but through roots running under the sidewalk into a deep, rich alluvial soil.

I lament all that I have described of these my neighbor trees, and looking down upon it I say it is not beautiful. But looking up at the continuous green canopy which these maltreated trunks support, swaying in the light summer breeze against the serene blue beyond—swaying not only with the utmost grace of motion, but with the utmost stately majesty—I say that cheaply, inconsiderately as the planting work was done, if the result is not to be called beautiful, it is only because it has more of sublimity than beauty. And, I ask, if man is not to live by bread alone, what is better worth doing well than the planting of trees?

Few who have not traveled with their attention specially given to the point can be aware how rarely trees are suitably selected, suitably placed, protected and cared for in our streets. There are not many towns that present a single example of a well-planted street, if even of a well-planted tree. I know of but one in which a well-considered planting system has been generally, or even extensively, carried out. I am glad to say that that one is our federal capital, in the streets of which more than fifty thousand trees now stand, with but a single defect, and that not of intention but of incompleteness, to be repaired as soon as public opinion shall have been educated—educated, be it observed, not simply to admire and demand verdant vistas and canopies, but to admit and respect the elemental conditions of life and health in the trees of which they must be framed.\*

But if public opinion is uneducated to sustain what it is educated to demand in the planting of trees, how much more in the planting of parks? Yet here the trouble lies, less in ignorance

\*There are some trees in the Washington planting of unsuitable species, and the beds of soil generally need enlargement.

and the prevalence of inadequate and shiftless ideas, than in the cross-currents and want of co-ordination of right ideas.

Parks are now as much a part of the sanitary apparatus of a large town as aqueducts and sewers. Their management should be as much a matter of sanitary economy, and as rigidly subject to sanitary tests.

As it is, in applying such tests, two great errors prevail. As the second of these grows out of the first, I would like to trace the first up from what I believe to be its roots.

It is not long since the capital cities of the world were so ill-provided with means of cleanliness, that much of the waste now carried off by sewers was deposited in the streets. Not forty years ago hogs roved in the fashionable residence quarters of New York under protection of the law, and for the same reason that excuses the turkey-buzzards of Charleston and the dogs of Constantinople:—without them the odor from filthy garbage and putrid animal wastes would have been even more intolerable than it was.

The custom of throwing offal and ordure into the streets had not gone out in large parts of Edinburgh and of Paris even thirty years ago, nor some time later in the principal cities of Italy. It had prevailed throughout London a few years earlier, and, there being no general water supply, it was a question of Heaven's pleasure how long the streets should remain uncleaned. No mere brooming over the rude pavements of that period being sufficient to fully remove the chief cause of offense, the air was nearly everywhere perceptibly foul, and this to a degree often provocative, in time of epidemics, of a panicky disposition to flee the town. Where there were parks, they gave the highest assurance of safety, as well as a grateful sense of peculiarly fresh and pure air. In London, besides the better known large parks, there were, early in this century, nearly a hundred small parks—more than three times as many as we yet have in New York. The political economy of the day valued them almost exclusively because of their cleaner air, and few travelers' stories or other general accounts of London, until lately, failed to refer to them as "airing grounds," "breathing places," as "the lungs of London," and so on. It has been recognized by men of science and leaders of public opinion that they were pleasant and useful in other ways, but, until within a few

years, these other ways have been considered as of incidental and relatively insignificant value.

The current of public opinion thus established is still so strong that scientific sanitarians are often carried off their feet by it. I have a pamphlet prepared by an eminent physician, not ten years ago, in which the project of a park, now being formed at great cost, is advocated solely with reference to the value of its air.

Supposing the question to be taken up, as a problem of sanitary engineering, how to supply the people of a city with a certain amount of air, as the problem of supplying a certain amount of water or of gas-light often is, it may be considered certain that the solution would take nothing like the form which we find represented in our large parks.

An expedient is in general use, however, for reconciling the actual practice of park-making and management with an apparent adherence to the atmospheric theory of their value. It would be formalized briefly somewhat in this way: "It being desired that people should benefit by the sanitary advantage of breathing, even for one or two hours a week, the air of the parks, it is reasonable and economical to beguile them into doing so by making the parks *attractive*. Hence, besides building roads and walks and supplying shade, seats and opportunities of refreshment, large sums may be wisely expended in the planting of trees, and the introduction of other objects purely with *decorative* motives." (I say nothing of exercise, because it is an incident of taking the air, and is allowed for in any theory of value.)

But will the airing theory, as thus amended, account for the value which is generally recognized to be found in our parks?

Perhaps the shortest way to show that it will not, may be to state my own professional experience. Within four parks, there have been planted, under my supervision, more than half a million trees and shrubs, in the selection, disposition, planting and care of which I am not conscious that the first thought has been given to their comparative air-purifying value or to their decorative effect. Beyond the number referred to, wind-breaks have been planted, and in small special districts—episodes of these parks, foreign to their main themes—a few trees, with a distinctly decorative motive. But much more than ninety-nine of every hundred have been planted and managed throughout,

as far as under my direction, with a very different motive. Nor do I think that any flowers, fountains, monuments, statues, or other so-called decorative objects, have ever been placed in parks of my motion, with a decorative motive, except as just explained as to the few decorative trees.

Perhaps I have been disposed to resist overmuch those who could see nothing in a park but an airing apparatus, to be made attractive by decorations; perhaps, too little. I assume nothing in either respect, but only argue that I must have taken a very different view of the requirements of the public in a park, and that if this view had little to recommend it to the public and was perplexing and displeasing to common sense, the fact would have been much more clearly established than it has been. As it is, I have been pursuing a purpose of an entirely distinct character, and in so far as I have done so successfully, it would appear that the result is not unsatisfactory to the public. On the contrary, with every renewed attempt to set it aside, or to thwart it, on the theory that a park should be but a decorated airing ground, the more decorated at all points the better, and that nothing else is of consequence, the more plainly it appears that the public finds in the park something of value not to be thus explained.

I must not neglect to point out that the pursuit of this other purpose cannot in the least interfere with or lessen the value of a park as an airing ground; I claim that it does not make it less, but in the long run much more attractive than the exclusively decorative motive, while a consistent pursuit of it, if long sustained, would not be more, but much less the costlier. On the other hand, the pursuit of the decorative motive, in planting or otherwise, is in its tendency, destructive of the objects which I claim should be paramount.

Now to the question, what is this other motive? It is plainly not enough to answer that it is to move the mind recreatively, because that is equally the motive of Punch and Judy, of a flower-garden, of a cabinet of curiosities, of jewelry.

A skilled man may appraise a show-case of jewelry, considering, as to each piece in turn, the weight and fineness of its gold, the size and color of its stone, the refinement of its chasing, and the degree in which its design and workmanship are of the ruling fashion, and thus come in the end to a close estimate of

the value of the whole. One may go through a park and take account of the decorative value of the trees and all other notable objects in much the same way. But when the inventory is complete, the estimate of the recreative value of the collection will hardly have been begun.

In attempting to distinguish the action in the mind, and through the mind upon the entire organization of men, that I suppose should constitute the special recreative and sanative value of large parks, I shall be obliged to grope my way in a branch of science in which I have no claim to be adept. My apology for doing so is my desire to interest in the search those better qualified for it.

If a convalescent, leaving a bed for the first time in months, tries to walk straight from door to door across a clear, smooth, level floor, he will be conscious that several distinct mental efforts are needed to the ordering of his every step. A month later it may happen that the same man shall walk through a forest, rough, stony and with tangled undergrowth, constantly adapting his movements to numerous and complicated obstacles, both near and distant, and this with so little mental effort that he is conscious of none. All the time he may be sustaining a conversation, whistling a tune, or keeping close watch of a bird or a dog. So far from the necessary exercise of judgment interrupting or disturbing consecutive thought, the most profound courses of thought known to man have been pursued under such circumstances and with such absorption of mind, that obstacles of considerable difficulty, ordinarily calling for watchfulness and skill, have been overcome so lightly that no recollection of having passed them has remained on the mind.

We all act much and often most wisely on opinions, or mental impulses which we use as opinions, that have come to us through no process of thought that we can recall. We say, while engaged in conversation, that we think thus and so, not having been aware of such thought until it was passing our lips. Much that we call tact, sense, genius, inspiration, instinct, is of this unconscious process.

Holding this experience in view, it will seem probable that the mind not only produces thoughts and gives direction to the body without conscious effort, or process to be recalled, but that it *receives* impressions, information, suggestions, the raw

material of thought; that it stores and holds them for after use; that it is fed, refreshed, revived and restocked by what it thus receives, all unconscious of the process.

I write with no effort for verbal accuracy, being sure that everyone knows from experience that of which I wish these phrases to be a reminder, and with such experience in view, I am equally sure that the distinction will be intelligible that I propose to make between what I shall call conscious, or direct recreation, and *unconscious, or indirect recreation*.

The probability may also be recognized that objects and arrangements (a choice and disposition of trees for example), best adapted to supply or augment direct recreation, is not that which should be chosen with a view to indirect recreation. It may even appear that objects before which people are called to a halt, and to utter mental exclamations of surprise or admiration, are often adapted to interrupt and prevent, or interfere with processes of indirect or unconscious recreation.

I do not intend here to discuss how the motive of unconscious recreation would lead us to lay out or to plant a park; I do not assume to have defined with precision what this so-called unconscious recreation is. But after such light upon it as may have been given, if there be any to whom the idea is not familiar, I may be allowed to submit that the highest value of a park must be expected to lie in elements and qualities of scenery to which the mind of those benefiting by them, is liable, at the time the benefit is received, to give little conscious cogitation, and which, though not at all beyond study, are of too complex, subtle and spiritual a nature to be readily checked off, item by item, like a jeweler's or a florist's wares.

There is one thought more that comes to me in connection with this of unconscious recreation, that I may yet be excused for suggesting.

It will be felt, I think, that as between the beauty of a common wild flower seen at home, nearby others of its class, peeping through dead leaves or a bank of mossy turf, and that of a hybrid of the same genus, double, of a rare color, just brought from Japan, now first blooming in America, taken from under glass, and shown us in a bunch of twenty, set in an enameled vase against an artfully-managed back-ground, there is something of this difference: The latter is beyond comparison the

more decorative, superb, attractive, only, perhaps, not quite as much so as it is rare, distinguished and—costly. But the former, while we have passed it by without stopping, and while it has not interrupted our conversation or called for remark, may possibly, with other objects of the same class, have touched us more, may have come home to us more, may have had a more soothing and refreshing sanitary influence.

There is an association between scenes and objects such as we are apt to call simple and natural, and such as touch us so quietly that we are hardly conscious of them.

Many of the latter class, while they have been the solace and inspiration of the most intelligent and cultivated men the world has known, have been enjoyed by cottagers in peasant villages, living all their lives in a meagre and stinted way. It is folly, therefore, to say of the art that would provide these forms of recreation, either that it is too high for some or too low for others.

But this is to be said and said sadly: As a result of the massing of population in cities; of the centering of communication in cities; of the increasing resort to cities for recreation; of the tendency of fashions to rise in and go out from the wealthy class in cities; of the prominence given by the press to the latest matters of interest to the rich and the fashion-setting classes, and of the natural assumption that people of great wealth get that for themselves that is most enjoyable—as a result of all this—the population of our country is being rapidly educated to look for the gratification of taste, to find beauty, and to respect art, in forms not of the simple and natural class; in forms not to be used by the mass domestically, but only as a holiday and costly luxury, and with deference to men standing as a class apart from the mass.

All this tends to our impoverishment through the obscuration, supercession and dissipation of tastes which, under our older national habits, and especially under our older village habits, were productive of a great deal of happiness, and a most important source of national wealth.

And I submit that, both in the planting of village streets and in the planting of town parks, this tendency is rather to be resisted by sanitarians than to be enthusiastically pursued.

Very truly yours,

FRED'K LAW OLMSTED