

*photographs by lee friedlander*

*from his new book Lee Friedlander Photographs*

Frederick Law Olmsted Landscapes

# OLMSTED RAMBLE

*a look at the legacy of frederick law olmsted, sr., on the 150th anniversary of the design of central park*

**FROM THE BACK BAY TO THE BILTMORE, FROM EAST COAST TO WEST, THE OLMSTED FIRM LEFT AN IMPRINT**

on America. That's cause to celebrate with the 150th anniversary of Central Park's design by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., and Calvert Vaux, along with the new expanded edition of *The Master List of Design Projects of the Olmsted Firm* and the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit "Lee Friedlander: A Ramble in Olmsted Parks," with the renowned photographer of the American scene turning his lens on some of the nation's most iconic landscapes. Here a roundtable discusses the Olmsted legacy—**Doug Blonsky, president of the Central Park Conservancy; Ethan Carr, noted author of *Wilderness by Design* and *Mission 66 and the National Park Dilemma*; Lucy Lawliss, resources program manager for four national parks in the San Francisco East Bay; and Catherine Nagel, executive director of the National Association for Olmsted Parks.** Carr, Lawliss, and Nagel all contributed to the *Master List*, an exhaustive look at the Olmsted oeuvre, over 6,000 projects that helped shape a nation. With plans ramping up for the National Park Service centennial in 2016—including a major two-part conference on parks past and future in Charlottesville, Virginia, and San Francisco later this year—Olmsted's work has never seemed more relevant.



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE BOOK LEE FRIEDLANDER PHOTOGRAPHS FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED LANDSCAPES, PUBLISHED BY DISTRIBUTED ART PUBLISHERS 2008, © LEE FRIEDLANDER

*Above:* Frederick Law Olmsted's signature layered textures. The photographs in this article—from the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit “Lee Friedlander: A Ramble in Olmsted Parks”—portray Central Park as “a jungle dreaming of civilization,” curator Jeff Rosenheim told the New York Times. Friedlander channels the Olmsted vision, putting the focus on nature with buildings and manmade objects often in the background.

*TODAY PEOPLE LOVE THE PARK AS THEIR BACKYARD, NOT*



## NECESSARILY AS A GREAT AMERICAN LANDSCAPE. THAT'S A GOOD THING, BUT YOU CAN EASILY SLIP AWAY FROM MAKING SURE IT'S KEPT SACRED. NOT LONG AGO LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS TURNED THEIR BACK ON THE OLMSTED PHILOSOPHY, WANTING TO MAKE THEIR MARK WITH THE LATEST DESIGN OF THE MOMENT. NOW, WITH THE GREEN MOVEMENT, THE REST OF THE WORLD IS CATCHING UP WITH HIM.

*Catherine: What has Central Park meant for America?*

**ETHAN:** Central Park ushered in a new era. It was not only a critical but a popular success. In the winter of 1858, after the lake was excavated and flooded, thousands came to ice skate. And the public hasn't looked back since. It was an enormous economic success, too. Increased tax assessments more than paid for the park very quickly, and other cities wanted to emulate. So this anniversary is not just about celebrating Central Park, it's about celebrating the whole American park movement.

**DOUG:** Today people love the park as their backyard, not necessarily as a great American landscape. That's a good thing, but you can easily slip away from making sure it's kept sacred. Not long ago landscape architects turned their back on the Olmsted philosophy, wanting to make their mark with the latest design of the moment. Now, with the green movement, the rest of the world is catching up with him.

*Lucy: Olmsted was a high-concept thinker, not a fuzzy-thinking Victorian as some suppose.*

**ETHAN:** The experience of Central Park is visceral, intense, emotional. Olmsted's work was never shallow or fussy or strictly ornamental. Today he gets wrongly charged with Victorian excess, as the epitome of the 19th century picturesque. His work transcends those labels. The great rhetoric of his day was how important parks are for public health, individual happiness, and the successful functioning of society. These ideas are as profound now as they were then. Some practitioners make easy characterizations because they don't understand the historical context. Others, like Michael Van Valkenburgh, fully appreciate the Olmstedian tradition. His Teardrop Park, in lower Manhattan, evokes a sense of expansive beauty and emotional release, despite its tiny size, with constant change throughout the day and throughout the year. A dramatic outcrop drips with water or ice—depending on the season—and there's a swamp, too. People experience a range of emotions, because there's not a single narrative or layer of meaning. This is often missing in parks designed in a more severe modern idiom.

*Catherine: What were some of Central Park's new ideas?*

**ETHAN:** One was that governments need to be involved in park-making because if they aren't, they can't create a society where people can be happy. New York before 1858 was a place where people had

no access to nature, no chance to experience beauty. That changed because Olmsted brought the country back to the city. Remember, when people of his generation were children, they could still walk out of New York and into nature. By the 1850s, people were trapped in an urban environment. The government was key in changing that. Yes, real estate speculators were involved, and yes, the park served elite interests. But there were important public purposes, too. One of the reasons New York didn't have a professional police or fire department in the 1830s and 1840s—well, in part they needed to develop those institutions—but in part they didn't have stable tax revenues.



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So in a sense projects like Central Park helped lead to institutions that improved life across the board.

**DOUG:** On the other hand, Olmsted early on recommended a board of guardians to take the park's day-to-day management out of the hands of government. It took us all this time to realize he was right. But today the park really does exactly what it was designed to do. How many landscapes work exactly as they were meant to 150 years later?

**ETHAN:** Of course, details change—people aren't riding in carriages, they're riding on bicycles. They're not promenading, they're

*Left: A bridge in Central Park. Above: Bough of a mature tree at Cherokee Park in Louisville, Kentucky. "Parks made possible what [Olmsted] termed 'unconscious' recreation, whereby the visitor achieved a musing state, immersed in the charm of naturalistic scenery that acted on the deepest elements of the psyche," writes Charles Beveridge in the Master List of Design Projects of the Olmsted Firm. "There the visitor could experience an 'unbending' of the faculties that would restore mental and physical energies, renewing strength for the daily exchange of services that sustained the community of the city."*

## NEW YORK BEFORE 1858 WAS A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE HAD

jogging. But essentially they're using the park for many of the same basic purposes.

**DOUG:** The economic success continues, too. We just finished a study of the park's value to the city. The premium it puts on real estate is off the charts.

**Catherine:** Doug, could you walk us through some of the restoration's keynotes?

**DOUG:** A stroll through the park can be so inspiring—here are a few highlights. Let's start with the beauty of the mall, where you descend the staircase at Bethesda Terrace—lined with 16,000 newly restored tiles—and emerge to a statue of an angel on water, the only piece originally commissioned for the park. So you have elegant formality contrasted with the natural world of the ramble, just across the way. It's breathtaking.

I've enjoyed the ramble so much lately—partly because it's fenced



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off now so I'm by myself! Soon everyone will share the experience.

As you walk over to Beau Bridge, in the next month or so you'll see eight Victorian urns, four on each side, that have been missing for about 70 years, each one a piece of beauty. We're having them recast right now, except for one. There's a story behind that.

A guy who worked for me, an historic preservationist, used to ride his bike home past a shuttered house on 145th Street. It was surrounded by a chain link fence, about to be demolished. Every night he'd look at this thing on the porch, and think "this looks familiar."

**Above and right: Central Park.** *Olmsted believed that every city needed a freely accessible public space, says Charles Beveridge in the Master List, "the most effective antidote to the debilitating artificiality of the built city and the stress of urban life."*

**NO ACCESS TO NATURE, NO CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE BEAUTY. THAT CHANGED BECAUSE OLMSTED BROUGHT THE COUNTRY BACK TO THE CITY. REMEMBER, WHEN PEOPLE OF HIS GENERATION WERE CHILDREN, THEY COULD STILL WALK OUT OF NEW YORK AND INTO NATURE. BY THE 1850s, PEOPLE WERE TRAPPED IN AN URBAN ENVIRONMENT.**

So he took a picture of it, did his research, and darn if it didn't look like one of the missing urns. Somehow or other—don't ask me how—we got it before the house was torn down.

Elsewhere in the park, shorelines have been restored, lake caves opened up, and much more.

**Lucy:** *Olmsted exaggerated the landscape by stripping away ornamentation. His parks become a minimalist take on nature, so people would see in a new way. That's a very contemporary concept, designing a park around a "native" place. Yet when asked to "do Central Park" elsewhere, he refused. He wanted the land to dictate the design.*

**ETHAN:** Each project was an experiment—an innovation—in response to a specific site. That idea is very contemporary, too. George Vanderbilt wanted a park for his North Carolina chateau, Biltmore, but Olmsted pointed out that the surrounding mountains wouldn't support it. He said it would be a wonderful place for scientific forestry, though, so Vanderbilt got the nation's first demonstration forests, with formal gardens around the house. In Boston, the park system was engineered to enhance the city's drainage and flood control, an idea that we're only now rediscovering.

**Catherine:** *What are some of the lessons that cities can apply to their parks?*

**DOUG:** When you have high visitation you need strong management. With a building you can get away with a little dinginess. With a park, you see decline overnight. It must be graffiti-free all the time, litter-free all the time, with benches repaired, lights repaired. Otherwise it goes into a quick spiral. People think Central Park was beautiful until the 1960s, then went downhill until the conservancy brought it back. Actually it's gone up and down many times.

**ETHAN:** The most recent restoration, though, has been as important to the park movement as Olmsted's original creation. Other municipalities, other states—even the federal government—have looked to the conservancy's public/private partnerships as a model. Its management plan nurtured the development of the discipline of historical landscape architecture.

**DOUG:** We're only just getting to the fun details, like restoring the coves and the caves in the rowboat lake, bringing back the bridges, and realizing the full brilliance of the vistas and view sheds.

**ETHAN:** It really is in the details. To know you're bringing it back to those historic photographs where everybody is dressed up along the ramble is really tremendous. The restoration takes the park to a whole new level.





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## EACH PROJECT WAS AN EXPERIMENT—AN INNOVATION—

**LUCY:** It's only now that you see the full greatness of the art. Sometimes it takes a restoration—with the original plan in hand—to bring out all that was imagined. Look at the plan for Atlanta's Druid Hills. It shows the firm working with a bereft piedmont where now, a century later, you have these great mature trees on carefully shaped terrain, creating a multitude of views and vistas. With the new expanded edition of the *Master List*—and the archive of drawings at the Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts—hundreds of places like Druid Hills have the chance to make the genius blossom.

**Catherine:** *The publication is not just a list, but a sweeping look at the firm's effect on the nation's landscape, with original drawings and interpretive essays.*

**LUCY:** In many ways it's a book of firsts. In writing my essay, I found that the Olmsted firm did the first country club—also in Brookline. The country club was itself an American invention, an outgrowth of the dining clubs of Great Britain and later here. Essentially, because of all the open land, the dining club moved to the country—as a “driving club” for carriages. This coincided with the introduction of golf, so there was an explosion of interest in the game. As a result, the Olmsted firm was involved in the first golf course subdivision—in Baltimore—and for a decade worked for Bobby Jones' Augusta National, probably the country's most famous course.

The Olmsteds worked in almost every state; their narrative is part of the American story. Right after Central Park, Olmsted, Sr., came to California, where he designed a cemetery in Oakland, but most importantly wrote about Yosemite's Mariposa Grove, calling for the landscape to be set aside for the people of the United States.

The Olmsted firm was seminal in defining the practice of landscape architecture, a legacy that communities are starting to realize should be preserved. Unfortunately, places are disappearing every day, largely out of ignorance. The *Master List* should help address the issue.

**Catherine:** *A recent report from the Director of the National Park Service, Mary Bomar, talks about putting children more in touch with nature. In Central Park, right next to 5th Avenue, children can explore a cave or put their feet in a lake.*

**ETHAN:** People are being denied something essential—another idea that's coming back. Nothing is new except what you forget, as they say. But this time we want to make sure it doesn't happen again, especially for children.

**DOUG:** There's no question that for us the next phase is using the park as an outdoor classroom. One of the things I'm working on is creating a small public high school here. To have a school get the benefit of the park every day, that would be a dream come true.

You need to get kids when they're young. Then they see their parents throw litter on the ground, and make them pick it up. It brings new respect to the entire family.

**Lucy:** *Olmsted talked about a doctor telling a stressed-out businessman to just go walk in the park. Doug, how does Central Park connect with the public health agenda?*

**DOUG:** I always laugh when people ask what are some of the park's hallmarks as a great democratic space. I say even dogs off a leash

**IN RESPONSE TO A SPECIFIC SITE. GEORGE VANDERBILT WANTED A PARK AT HIS NORTH CAROLINA CHATEAU, BILTMORE, BUT OLMSTED POINTED OUT THAT THE SURROUNDING MOUNTAINS WOULDN'T SUPPORT IT. HE SAID IT WOULD BE A WONDERFUL PLACE FOR SCIENTIFIC FORESTRY, THOUGH, SO VANDERBILT GOT THE NATION'S FIRST DEMONSTRATION FORESTS, WITH FORMAL GARDENS AROUND THE HOUSE.**



© LEE FRIEDLANDER

don't fight with each other, and I can't recall the last time I saw two people getting in a fight. It is truly a United Nations.

Obviously you can come to the park, sit down, read the paper, and relax, but clearly the place calls you to explore. The tourists want to get in as much as they can, in either two hours or four hours or a weekend. They hike all the way from 59th Street to 110th Street. They come to admire a masterpiece.

We have programs as part of our recreational agenda—hiking and walking programs tied into obesity and diabetes—but the vast majority of visits are from people wanting a spontaneous experience. Most visits just aren't structured, that's one of the park's great beauties. And it pays off. Over 2,000 people have adopted benches in the park, with most of the plaques expressing the great joy they get here.

**Left: Rockwood in Tarrytown, New York. Above: Brooklyn's Prospect Park.** *“The purpose of a park was to provide city dwellers with an experience of extended space that would counteract the enclosure of the city by providing ‘a sense of enlarged freedom,’” writes Charles Beveridge in the Master List. “An expanse of meadow with gracefully contoured terrain, gently curving paths, and an indefinite boundary of trees was the central element of a park.”*

*Catherine: Doug, what did you do in the way of outreach to get people to return?*

**DOUG:** It's incredible, but we really didn't have to lure them back. We said make it beautiful and they will come. When I started, tourists didn't go into Central Park, now they're most of the people here. We don't do a lot of organized activities; things happen on their own.

*Catherine: The conservancy has demonstrated that cities can't go it alone. You have to have people working together, and a vision.*

**DOUG:** When I started, the park was run under a crew-based system. Six people piled in a pickup, went out, and came back a couple hours later unable to point to one thing that was completed. On top

of that, the conservancy was handling horticulture and the parks department was handling maintenance, so one of our guys would go out with a lawnmower and instead spend the time picking up trash. It just wasn't working. So we broke the park into 49 zones. We told staffers, each of you is going to have your own zone, with your own resources and support. It made a huge impact. Volunteers used to be in a huge group, sometimes creating more work than they did. Now the zone gardeners have two or three volunteers at their disposal on any given day. It's forged incredible relationships.

Relationships really are essential, because the park will always be a political football. We started an advisory committee of dog owners

## **THE OLMSTED FIRM WAS SEMINAL IN DEFINING THE PRACTICE OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, A LEGACY THAT COMMUNITIES ARE STARTING TO REALIZE SHOULD BE PRESERVED. UNFORTUNATELY, PLACES ARE DISAPPEARING EVERY DAY, LARGELY OUT OF IGNORANCE.**



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*Above: Highland Park, Rochester, New York. Right: Washington Park, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photographer Lee Friedlander portrays Olmsted's creations as "living works of art," says Met curator Jeff Rosenheim. Writes Charles Beveridge in the Master List: "Olmsted had great faith in the ability of art to improve society . . . he was convinced that the spacious, gracefully modulated terrain of his parks provided a specific medical antidote to the artificiality, noise, and stress of city life. In this and many other ways he strove to use his skill as an artist to meet the most fundamental of human needs."*

because of pressure to create dog runs. That gave me a platform to convince people that we shouldn't do that. Most of those runs are gnarly and funky. Instead we rotate areas with wood chips from one season to the next. We say here's where your dog can be off leash. Next season it'll be elsewhere.

Central Park has five community boards, and when we propose a project we get their input first. There are friends groups, too. We're constantly out there making sure that citizens are part of the process. It protects us in the long run. Relationships are the cornerstone for all we're doing to maintain Olmsted's treasure for America, and the world.

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