Matt Harrison tackles the park design challenge of the day.

Good Neighbors: Growing 21st Century Park Stewards through Real-World Teaching & Learning

By Matt Harrison
SCA Intern, Fall 2013

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Nestled in the historic town of Brookline, a short distance from Boston, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site celebrates and preserves the legacy of the nation's first and most famous landscape architect.
A visionary who left his mark across the nation, you find his work everywhere when you begin to look. Frederick Law Olmsted is credited with works as famous as Central Park, Prospect Park, the Biltmore Estate, the campus of Stanford University, and countless more. Even my daily commute is a testament to his work, as the D line of the Boston subway system skirts the Riverway section of Olmsted's Emerald Necklace (the string of Boston parks he created in the 1880s). Since the beginning of July, I have been spending the majority of my time learning and talking about Olmsted and the landscape architecture firm he established here with his sons in 1883. I have found his home, office and its surrounding landscape (named Fairsted) to be the calm, peaceful environment that he would have wanted them to be. The site as a whole offers a compelling look, not only into the new form of functional public art that Olmsted created with his parks, but also the innovative inner-workings of a nineteenth and twentieth century business. In the office wing, which would have hummed with the work of almost 80 employees at its height in 1930, the drafting tables and printing equipment is now quiet and serene.

But for a couple of months each spring and fall, the grounds and buildings of Fairsted are invigorated with the energy and excitement of local third-graders, taking part in the park's award-winning program, *Good Neighbors: Landscape Design & Community Building*. I want to give you a view into my experience and grant the program some well-deserved recognition.

Good Neighbors, developed to fit the third-grade curriculum of local Boston and Brookline Schools, has been teaching kids about history and community stewardship for the last two seasons. When I first accepted my position at Fairsted, I was excited to work with kids, despite being unsure what it would entail. Upon my introduction to the program it was easy to see what made *Good Neighbors* so successful and popular with local third-graders. The activities are carefully crafted to be engaging and instructive for kids. It features hands-on interaction in every activity, allowing the students to explore nature, science and art with all their senses. Each section of the landscape offers opportunities for surprise, reward and collaboration. I am not sure I've ever seen so much learning accompany so much fun in a group of youngsters. The interest and enthusiasm that the program evokes in all who participate; students, teachers, parents, and educators speaks to its brilliance.

At the beginning of the week, rangers from Fairsted visit the school and introduce the program, giving historical background to Olmsted and landscape architecture. Each of the subsequent days, one class at a time gets to come and visit the site. Their day is divided into three small group activities based on exploration, creativity, science and design among other things. First, the students have the opportunity to explore the historic restored landscape, where they use maps to locate their own specific plant. They then create a close-up observational drawing of their plant which they use to help describe a section of the landscape to the rest of the class.

Historic home and office of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted

Top left: Map in hand, students head off to find plants in the landscape. Top right: Students use Visual Thinking Strategies to learn about their plants before drawing them. Bottom: An independent artist is fully immersed in drawing his plant from close observation.

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Second, the kids enter the design studio section of the historic building to learn about the original tools of a landscape architect, and how they would have been used. And finally, they dive into the restored model shop of the Olmsted firm where they create a 3-D model of their own park, based on detailed requests from clients. Due to the reorganization inside the design studio wing of the house, the classes I worked with only participated in the landscape and the model shop sections. In my role as a chaperon and sometimes-instructor, I often found myself wishing I could be participating right along with the kids. I'd heard all about how the students loved this program before I was able to see it for myself. When I finally did, I can say it was truly a delight. While I was prepared for the challenges that a third grade class can bring, the moments of enthusiasm and excitement that *Good Neighbors* fosters made it all worth it. My first hurdle of the day, generally, involved trying to memorize ten or so names in a matter of minutes (many of which did not come easily to my Midwestern tongue). But this turned out to be easier than expected, and the joy then came in matching the personalities to the names. And so many personalities! The interactions ranged from hilarious to infuriating, the nine-year old observations from perplexing to enlightening. On the landscape, the students were excited to hunt down their specific plant and get to drawing. The concept of drawing from close observation can be hard to grasp, but the kids who embrace it and really get their nose up close to their barberry or pachysandra would end up with some truly impressive drawings. At the same time, you always get the kids who draw their hay-scented fern with five pink petals and white fluffy clouds in the background. It's an activity meant to get the students to look closely and carefully at what makes up the landscape and environment and translate that onto paper and into words. Not surprisingly for eight and nine year-olds, it can be tricky for some to reign in that wild creativity in favor of such intense concentration. As they observe and then explore the whole landscape as a group, the rangers tell them more about Olmsted and his favorite ways to design landscapes and parks. The students are then able to return to these lessons in the next and most exciting activity; the model shop.

As much as they love being outside and drawing, I think it is safe to say that the model shop is the activity that really makes an impression with the students. They partner up and are ushered into the barn with as much pomp and circumstance as we can muster. "This is the exact same room where Olmsted's workers made their models!" we tell them. On five separate tables, each group is confronted with their own "topographical base," hefty green-topped boards that mimic the contours of an empty landscape. The kids are asked to think about a central question as they build their parks: "How do thoughtfully-designed parks help strengthen communities?" The process is then kicked off with a short video, letting each group meet an individual client from the community who asks for specific elements in his or her park. We reveal the boxes of supplies to the hushed and excited groups. Paths, bridges, streams, lakes, play equipment, seven types of trees and shrubs, even lamps, benches and trash cans are all there for the wide-eyed students to use in their parks. The minature pieces, specially made to be pinned into the boards, give the students everything they need to design a well-thought out and beautiful minature park. They take off brimming with ideas and excitement, starting with the

Photo by Joel Veak

Top: Collaboration is key to the park design workshop. Bottom: Students explain their park design to peers during the public meeting.

paths, streams, and bridges, later moving the softscape elements like trees and shrubs. They finish off their parks with details like places to sit, lamps for light at night, and trash cans to keep them clean. Through the process they must remember those special elements that their clients asked for, as well as consider issues like shade versus open space and how species of plants grow together and on their own. Once each group has finished their park, the groups embark on what we call the "public meeting." This important activity allows each group to explain to their peers what ideas and goals they had in their park design. The students are able to clearly show how their park meets the needs of their client and respond to questions and comments by their peers. Quite invested in their design by this point, the public meeting always gets the students thinking hard and supporting their work with great ideas. Finally, we ask the class to step away and close their eyes while we quickly initiate the grand finale. Each of the five boards come together to create one grand rectangular park, reminiscent of a miniature Central Park with all paths, streams and slopes connecting together perfectly. The awe and delight that this impressive finale creates when we reveal it to the kids might be the greatest accomplishment of the program, and it is so much fun to watch each and every time. The activity wraps up with the group discussion of the proud new collective park, its features and its accomplishments. They are now well-prepared to answer the central question: "How do thoughtfully designed parks help strengthen communities?" The model shop activity does an amazing job of teaching the students to recognize the value and importance of all the things that go into the parks they know in their own communities. They love to point out how many great things there are to do in the miniature park they have created. "It's a great place to meet lots of different people," and "there are so many things to do" are always comments. We always emphasize that the park is made up of many specific elements that the community of clients asked for, but that can be enjoyed by all. The activity is a wonderful balance between art and function, and the ability to follow directions to produce a product. Plus, it is all very much representative of the real-life

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Students take stock of their final park design with pride.

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like to point out. The kids are able to follow the Olmstedian styles they have been learning about, and particularly love his use of "lots curvy lines" in his landscapes. In the responses we get from the students after the program, they always write how much they loved building a model park, just as Olmsted himself would come back and do it again. Some parents inquire as to how to get sets of their own. Even I wish I could get my hands on my own set, but they are specially produced and lovingly maintained by the park itself.

Good Neighbors, a wonderful example of place-based learning through the National Park Service, fosters an appreciation of parks and community well-being in the students who participate. I believe that for eight and nine year-olds, ideas like these are excellent building blocks toward a conservation-oriented mindset later in life. For me, this first experience in education has set a lofty precedent and inspired me to think about the importance of place-based *Good Neighbors* learning. And I can say I do think differently about community conservation after *Good Neighbors*.

I like to mention on my tours that, not only, were the Olmsteds important creators of new landscapes, but they were also integral in the protection of existing natural ones (Olmsted Sr. wrote a seminal report about the protection of Yosemite in 1865 and his son, Olmsted Jr. wrote the foundational language for the Organic Act of 1916, which established the NPS). The necessity of greenspace for a healthy society is by no means restricted to urban environments, and the Olmsteds certainly recognized this.

I think *Good Neighbors* is a wonderful foundation on which the kids come to recognize the wider importance of parks. Community conservation will lead to national and even global conservation. We must learn to care about our own homes and communities before we can learn to care about the planet, and as an early lesson in this, *Good Neighbors* is perfect.

To watch a *Good Neighbors* video documentary, visit: *http://www.nps.gov/frla/forteachers/goodneighbors.htm*

good neighbors
LANDSCAPE DESIGN & COMMUNITY BUILDING

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