Up and Out:
The whole world is our classroom
Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.

Landscape Architect to the Nation, Leading Pioneer in City Planning

The sons of great men are often not themselves great men, perhaps because they have lived in the shadow of their fathers. But occasionally the son of a great man becomes his father's worthy successor. Such was the case with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.

Olmsted Jr.'s father was, of course, also the father of landscape architecture in America. The arrival of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., from New York in 1881 established Boston as the national center of gravity for landscape architecture and the planning movement of the later nineteenth century," writes historian Margaret Henderson Floyd. New York's Central Park and Boston's Emerald Necklace are two of F.L.O. Sr.'s many achievements that still delight us today. He also created the master plans for myriad colleges and schools such as Stanford, U. Cal, Berkeley, Andover, and Groton. He was the very close friend of and collaborator with Boston's most renowned architect of the era, Henry Hobson Richardson.

F.L.O. Sr. was a 35-year-old bachelor when his brother died of tuberculosis. Two years later, he married his brother's wife, Mary Cleveland Perkins Olmsted, adopting her three children, one of whom, John Charles Olmsted, would later join his firm. In their attempt to add to the family, Frederick and Mary lost three children in infancy. Mary was 40 and F.L.O. was 48 when a surviving son was born July 24, 1870. He was named Henry Perkins Olmsted in honor of Mary's father.

So eager was F.L.O. Sr. to have his only surviving natural son follow him in the business that, when Henry was seven, he had him renamed after himself: F.L.O. Jr.

"Rick," as F.L.O. Jr. became known, attended Roxbury Latin—Class of 1890—in the school's heyday under Headmaster William Coo Collar. Rick founded the debate club and was its leading competitor. He was first business manager and then secretary of The Tripod. He made his mark as an athlete in bicycle racing, which was then a "hot" sport, and several times won the mile and half-mile in interscholastic races. In the summer vacation of 1886, 16-year-old Rick accompanied his father to California where F.L.O. Sr. was engaged with Senator Stanford in the early stages of planning the campus of the new university.

Rick never ceased to express his gratitude to Roxbury Latin: "I met there the first three of the best teachers I ever worked with, men who impressed me as being really good at their jobs, in three wholly different ways: [George F.] Forbes, who got across to me in experimental physics the kind of mental discipline that is the basis for all scientific work; [Daniel O.S.] Lowell, who, especially in English, showed us what clear thinking meant; and [Clarence] Gleason, who in Greek stimulated our sense of humor and appreciation of the reality of personalities discoverable among a mass of words...."

His appreciation for Roxbury Latin's democratic ethos was equally strong: "The diversity of social and economic background [of the students], combined with the more than average ability which was characteristic of the boys of the school, as a free school that did not have to adapt its standards to the sub-average part of the population like most public schools, was a notably broadening and maturing preparation for life in a democracy, and vastly more so than the conditions in private schools previously attended."

F.L.O. Sr. expressed his pride for his son at the time of Rick's Roxbury Latin graduation, calling him "just a good healthy boy, keeping the boyish condition longer than most, but not puerile...he has himself under good discipline, is studious, patient, deferential, and he receives advice gratefully and shapes his course reasonably by it... I have given him the reins and he has chosen his advisors and made his plans, so far as I can tell, wisely... I like him very much and he is affectionate and confiding to me, more than boys generally to their fathers, I think."

Rick went on to graduate magna cum laude from Harvard, and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. By then his father was 72 and obsessed (not too strong a word) with involving him in the family business. In the Harvard summer of 1892, Rick toured England and France with his father to study electric launches, waterside vegetation, and other matters that would enhance his father's work at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. Though the trip was supposed to provide the old man with a break from the relentless hard work that
was undermining his health, he set a whirlwind pace throughout. The following summer, F.I.O. Sr. arranged for Rick to work for Daniel H. Burnham at "White City," as the site of the Columbian Exposition was being readied in Chicago. Rick idolized Burnham: "The most exhilarating thing about [the work] was the prevailing spirit of self-subordinating cooperation in the joint pursuit of a common aim—an enthusiasm for an artistic ideal. Here I first encountered the stimulus and satisfaction of working, even though an unimportant younger, with the ablest architects and artists in the country, and with the best of engineers and executives. The catalyst largely responsible for these group reactions was a peculiar quality of contagious enthusiasm for an ideal on the part of the leader of the group—Burnham." It was Burnham who is alleged to have said: "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work... Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty. Think big." The impressive young Rick seems to have taken these words as his life's mission. While no project—or detail—was ever too small for him, his vision was always immense, his energy prodigious.

The summer after his Harvard graduation he worked as a surveyor in the Rocky Mountains with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Then in November 1894 he journeyed to Asheville, North Carolina, to serve as apprentice to his then ailing elderly father at the vast Vanderbilt estate ("Biltmore").

One of the few occasions on which Rick rebelled against his father was at Biltmore when the imperious old man tried to force him to study plants and to learn all their names—something the elder Olmsted regretted he had himself never done. After a particularly heckling letter from his father, Rick snapped: "I am compelled to answer, with pain and regret, after the most serious and thorough thought, that I would better enter upon another career." It was at Biltmore that summer that Rick became aware that his father was beginning to have trouble with his memory—the first signs of incipient dementia. And he found himself more and more frequently having to "cover" for him.

Despite his angry response to his father, it had become absolutely clear—both to himself and others—that Rick shared his father's passion for the profession, and he returned to Brookline in 1895 to join the business. When his increasingly senile father retired two years later, he and his half brother John Charles Olmsted took over what came to be called Olmsted Brothers. John Charles was 18 years older, an experienced designer and administrator; the 27-year-old F.I.O. Jr., concentrating on the aesthetics of the profession, quickly became the firm's more public face. Remarkably, there seems to be no evidence that the elder resented the younger.

Rick was blessed to be able to step right into commissions his father's reputation had earned, but he immediately proved himself more than worthy of his good fortune. Much of Rick's early work was landscaping great estates. But he also masterminded the campuses of West Point and of schools such as Taft and St. Paul's. From 1889 to 1920, he was landscape architect of Boston's Metropolitan Park Commission, responsible for continuing to develop the

In 1900 he was asked to teach the nation's first-ever college level course in landscape architecture at Harvard, and from 1903 to 1915 he was Charles Eliot Professor of Landscape Architecture.
city's extensive park system. Even as a very young man, Rick took a leading role in the emerging profession of landscape architecture. He was a founding member of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1899, serving twice as its president.

In 1900 he was asked to teach the nation's first-ever college-level course in landscape architecture at Harvard, and from 1903 to 1915 he was Charles Eliot Professor of Landscape Architecture. Charles W. Eliot 2nd wrote: "More than any other man, [F.L.O. Jr.] is responsible for the establishment of formal training of landscape architects and, through that training, for the standard and strength of the profession today."

In the years that followed, Olmsted Brothers would become the largest and most prestigious landscape architecture firm on earth. Its staff would grow to nearly 60 in the 1930's, as the firm undertook thousands of landscape projects across the nation. Like their father, the brothers worked in close collaboration with the leading architects of the era such as Bertram Goodhue. Altogether, Olmsted father and son would dominate American landscape architecture for a century: from F.L.O. Sr.'s work on Central Park in 1857 to F.L.O. Jr.'s death in 1957.

Olmsted laid out his philosophy of landscape architecture in simple and strikingly humble terms: "[I]n dealing with existing real landscapes, I have been guided by an injunction impressed on me by my distinguished father: namely, that when one becomes responsible for what is to happen to such a landscape his prime duty is to protect and perpetuate whatever of beauty and inspirational value, inherent in the landscape, is due to nature and to circumstances not of one's own contriving, and to humbly subordinate to that purpose any impulse to exercise upon it one's own skill as a creative designer."

In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him to the Senate Park Improvement Commission of the District of Columbia. The Commission's purpose was to revive and reinterpret the grand plans that Pierre L'Enfant had devised for the nation's capital. The Commission was loaded with star power and included Daniel H. Burnham, with whom Rick had worked in Chicago, Charles F. McKim, the New York architect, and renowned sculptor
"When one becomes responsible for what is to happen to such a landscape his prime duty is to protect and perpetuate whatever of beauty and inspirational value, inherent in the landscape, is due to nature and to circumstances not of one's own contriving..."

Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

The Commission's landmark findings—known as the McMillan Report—were to have a lasting impact on the new field of city planning. Olmsted's commitment to the City of Washington became one of his life's passions and he was named to every important commission on the city in the ensuing years, including the Commission on Fine Arts (1910-18) and the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (1926-31). Many prominent landmarks were enhanced by his vision and planning: the federal triangle, the White House grounds, the Jefferson Memorial, Roosevelt Island, Rock Creek Parkway, and the National Cathedral campus.

The Dictionary of American Biography states that "Perhaps more than any other person, Olmsted is responsible for the appearance of the nation's capital, and especially for the coherent quality of the monuments that bespeak the symbols of national power." As President Woodrow Wilson noted in a letter to Olmsted in 1918: "For all this service you have expected, and have received no money compensation; at times the task has been attended by public misconception so that your one satisfaction has been the consciousness of having given to your country the best that was in you to give."

The McMillan Report provided a vision not just for Washington but for cities across the country. Olmsted had been present at the creation—and a principal creator—of the modern concept of urban planning. Suddenly, cities across the nation were calling on the services of Olmsted Brothers. Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Rochester, New Haven, Newport were just some of the cities for which they prepared studies and designs.

The newly emerging suburban towns were just as eager for their guidance. Susan Klaus writes, "Many of the features of [F.L.O. Jr.'s] suburban plans have had enduring influence, including the concept of neighborhood-centered development, the differentiation of streets by function, the importance of common open and recreational spaces, and the need for continuing maintenance and aesthetic oversight to preserve the quality of the community."
By 1910 he was asked by his colleagues in the emerging profession to lead the first National Conference on City Planning. "Olmsted in his presidential addresses to this body over the next nine years helped to lay the theoretical foundation of the new discipline." His landmark article—"The Basic Principles of City Planning"—was published that same year, drawn from his Harvard course lectures. In 1917 he took the lead in organizing the American City Planning Institute and served as its first president.

Olmsted was particularly interested in the planning of new communities. Three of his most remarkable projects were Roland Park in Baltimore, Forest Hills Gardens on Long Island, and the Palos Verdes Estates in California. All three were efforts to create ideal aesthetic living conditions.

Starting in 1917, as the U.S. entered the First World War, Olmsted devoted nearly two years to managing the Town Planning Division of the U.S. Housing Corporation, the government's effort to create worker housing near essential war industries. He reflected that "these war experiences opened my eyes wider than ever to the enormous social and economic problems which the country faces in the need of securing decent, wholesome, and happy living conditions for its industrial workers generally."

On March 30, 1911, he married Sarah Hall Sharples of Cambridge, a graduate of Radcliffe, Class of 1898. Little is known of their marriage, except that they had a daughter Charlotte. She would go on to provide her parents with three grandchildren. But Olmsted rarely—even in his Harvard reunion reports—mentions his family or his "private" life. Work always came first: "From the time of my graduation, my professional life has absorbed most of my time and energy...."

One of Olmsted's most enduring contributions was his leadership in development of the National Park Service. As early as 1912 he had pointed out that the nation's parks were governed by conflicting principles, inconsistently administered.

It was Olmsted who in 1916 wrote the key language in the National Park Service Organic Act so that vast tracts of land could be set aside, free from development, for public enjoyment in perpetuity. Olmsted's

“He liked to get up high, for a comprehensive view, and so was a great climber of trees and abandoned water towers and decrepit house roofs, where few cared to join him.”

Developed between 1890 and 1920 as an upper-class streetcar suburb, Roland Park, Baltimore, Md., the first planned "suburban" community in North America. The early phases of the neighborhood were designed by Edward Breiten and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.
own words—enshrined in the law—state for all time the mission of the National Park Service: "To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

He remained the N.P.S.'s principal advisor for 30 years, and the Olmsted parks from coast to coast testify to his unwavering commitment. Whether it was the Florida Everglades or the California Redwoods—or a plethora of sites in between—Olmsted was a key factor in their preservation. Yosemite was one of his major commitments, and he served from 1928 to 1936 on its advisory Committee of Experts. His 1929 plan laid the foundation for California's extensive public park system. California, in fact, became more and more alluring to him, and by 1936 he could no longer resist its attraction: he left Brookline and established residence there.

At the dedication in 1953 of the "Olmsted Grove" of California redwood trees that had been purchased by friends to honor F.L.O. Jr.'s 83rd birthday, Horace M. Albright, a pioneer in the development of the National Park Service, stated, "I think [Olmsted] is the greatest Park man in the world, indeed the greatest of all time; for who among his contemporaries or in the past has so wisely, soundly, and with vast professional skill, so profoundly influenced plans and programs for city, state, and national parks as has young Frederick Law Olmsted?"

"Indefatigable" may be the word that best describes Olmsted. As his colleagues noted: "F.L. was never content to work out any problem solely from a map. A map he would have at any cost, but also, at any cost, he would see for himself.... Through swamps and thickets he would go, over flooded marshes and up crumbling hillsides, determined to see all, to miss nothing. He liked to get up high, for a comprehensive view, and so was a great climber of trees and abandoned water towers and decrepit house roofs, where few cared to join him." He enkindled great affection among his associates. They remained awestruck by his capacity for hard work: "F.L.'s power of concentration, his preoccupation with the matter at hand, was astonishing. He had need of concentration because, seemingly, he never wanted to refuse a call for his services and, though he might already have many things to do, always saw a possibility of doing a little more. His work days, therefore, were long, often continuing far into the night, and often without thought for the demands of food, drink, sleep, or relaxation by which normal existences are governed. This made him incomprehensible to new acquaintances, while those he chose to accompany him on his tasks were often hard put to keep up with him.""

"The vision thing" was a gift he most assuredly possessed, but remarkably it was accompanied by meticulous attention to the smallest and most insignificant aspects of his projects: "The excellence of his work was displayed not alone in rightness of conception but in the completeness and perfection of detail. He understood that any whole is made up of parts, and that a defective part contributes some definitiveness to the whole."

No one in the 20th century played as
Endnotes

4. James White, "Boston Public Library of 1887-95; the firm's major contribution to Boston's Beaux Arts architecture, but the city was transformed as much by Olmsted's romantic landscapes as by the work of its classically inspired architects." The "Emerald Necklace" is the park system that consists of Olmsted's Franklin Park plus Charlesbank, the Back Bay Fens, the Riverway, Jamaica Pond, the Arnold Arboretum, Marine Park, and pathways in between.
5. See F. Washington Jarvis, "Schola Illustris," p. 344, and 358 for F.L.O. Jr.'s involvement in planning R.I.'s new campus in Jamaica Plain (which was never executed); and 356 and 384 for his involvement in the development of the West Roxbury campus.
6. Jeffrey Karl Ochser, "H. H. Richardsons Complete Architectural Works," p. "Even more significant in Richardson's career was the role played by his close friend and neighbor, America's leading landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903). Neighbors initially on Staten Island and later in Brookline, the two men became extremely close. The evident theoretical consistency of Richardson's mature work may in some part be due to the influence of Olmsted, who in the course of his career developed a broad vision of the place of architecture in the American landscape. Richardson's work was in some part the result of Olmsted's influence on the development of architecture.
10. See Romy Willke, "Classification of Types of Garden Architecture," p. 344.
12. Richard did not really "retire" in 1905 (or 1949 in other states), but continued to be active until he died.
14. Roper, p. 356, describes F.L.O. Jr.'s office: "To a discerning observer, Olmsted's office could have given several clues to his own personality. Its almost featureless simplicity suggested that self-expression had no place in his work..."
17. Susan Klaas, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., p. 23.
18. Klaas, "FOL." 150.
24. Whiting and Phillips, "FOL." 149.
26. Italics mine.
27. Whiting and Phillips, "FOL." 153, for a comprehensive list of awards.
29. Italics mine.

My profound thanks to Sally Mospitz, Susan Klaas, and Alan Banks who kindly vetted this article, saving me from errors and offering helpful suggestions.