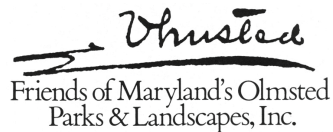


Baltimore City Planning

The Critical Role of the Olmsted Firm



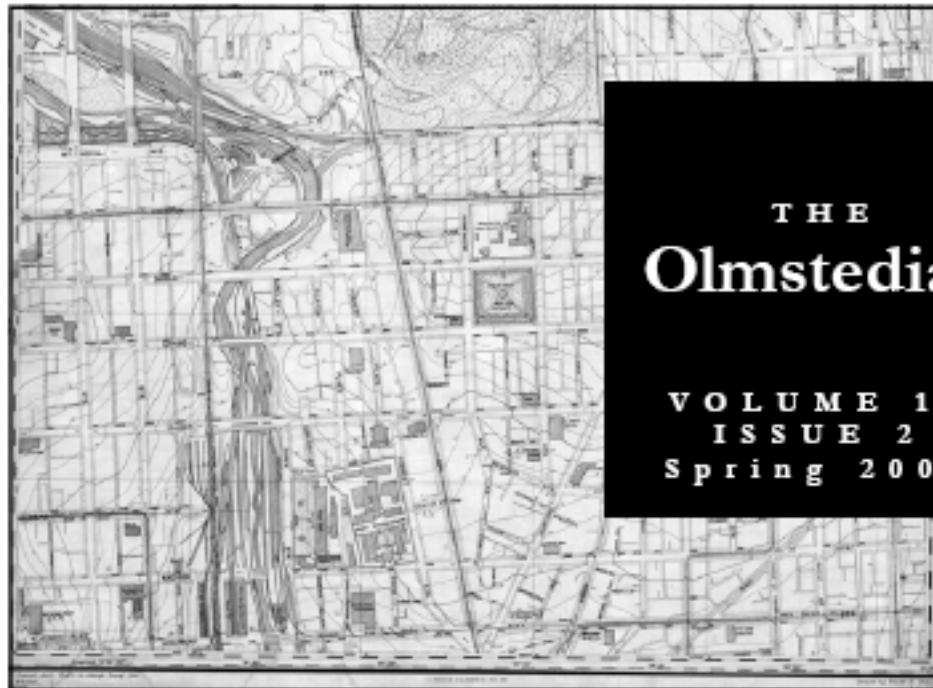
FMOPL Digest
olmstedmaryland.org

America's first landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) believed that parks and landscapes were an essential part of a democratic society. He played a major role in envisioning park systems for Buffalo, Boston, Louisville and Chicago, and his general principles and techniques are used in planning worldwide today.

Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects (OBLA)— the firm of his two sons— played a major role in promoting city planning as a practice and a profession. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1870–1957) served as the first president of the American City Planning Institute, an important role in the establishment of city planning in America.

Undoubtedly, the most important OBLA contribution to the shaping of Baltimore City is the 1904 *Report Upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore*, a document that still guides the need for balancing open space and development of real estate. Through subsequent work over 60 years in Baltimore, Olmsted Jr. helped lead the charge to create a City Planning Department and to call attention to the need for comprehensive planning.

The development of city planning in Baltimore evolved during the first half of the 20th Century as shown in the following major events:



A bird's eye view of the Mount Vernon neighborhood and Washington Monument before the tunneling of the Jones Falls river, a major improvement envisioned by the Olmsted firm. The Baltimore City Topographical Survey map depicted here dates to 1894. Courtesy of the Baltimore City Commission on Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP).

1900–1903

The Municipal Art Society recommends purchase of property for future parks in suburban areas. This proposal by civic leaders leads to commissioning OBLA for a report on the needs and opportunities for a comprehensive park system for the Baltimore region.

1904

Report Upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore by OBLA is published.

1910

Maryland Legislature authorizes creation of a Commission on City Plan (CCP), made up of the Mayor and eight appointees, to focus on building public highways, especially the Fallsway, and on the Civic Centre Plan.

1910

Olmsted, Jr. teams with John Carrere and Arnold Brunner to propose the Civic Centre Plan, funded by The Municipal Art Society and the Merchants & Manufacturers Association.

1914

Board of Public Improvements is created.

1918

Mayor James H. Preston appoints the City Planning Com-

mittee of the City of Baltimore (CPC), recognizing the apparent limitation of powers of the CCP. The main purpose is to prepare a study for the New Annex area, setting the current boundaries of Baltimore City.

1919

CPC submits a report, *The Development of the Territory Added under the Act of 1918* together with *Recommendations and Suggestions on Railroads, Rapid Transit, Parks, and Harbor Problems of the City*. This report recommends areas for parks in addition to those in the 1904 Olmsted Report. Approximately 970 acres of new parks, squares, playgrounds and parkways had been acquired from 1905 to 1918.

1923

Baltimore passes a zoning ordinance.

1925

CPC submits a further report to the Park Commissioners.

1926

Report and Recommendations on Park Extension for Baltimore by OBLA is published. This extensive report confirms the 1904 recommendations to link the Gwynns Falls, Jones Falls, and Herring Run stream valleys with a wide variety of parks,

parkways, and playgrounds.

1939

Amendment to a City Charter creates a new Commission on City Plan with nine members. This amendment abolishes both the City Planning Committee and the Board of Public Improvements.

1943

Henry Vincent Hubbard, a partner in OBLA, writes *Report and Recommendations to the Commission on City Plan, Baltimore, on Procedure of the Commission in City Rehabilitation*.

1949

Baltimore City Charter creates the Department of Planning.

OBLA's 1904 Report's Relevance Today

The Report Upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore, 1904, helped lay the groundwork for comprehensive planning in Baltimore. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. in particular, was a strong proponent of a central coordinating agency for planning in Baltimore. The 1904 Report laid out a system of open spaces and developed areas throughout the city — parks, churchyards, pub-

lic squares, playgrounds, school campuses, and schoolyards — linked by tree-lined parkways, boulevards, and stream valleys.

The 1904 Report looked not only at the natural landscape and topography, but also at lines of transportation—waterways, highways, railroads, wagon roads, secondary local streets and subdivisions. The Report also recommended establishing building lines.

Over three decades later, on April 25, 1939, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. wrote to Theodore Marburg, Chairman of the Executive Committee of Baltimore's Municipal Art Society, that he endorsed city planning as a sound public improvement policy. Olmsted stressed that planning was an essential public policy and required "continuing public attention." This was at an important juncture in the evolution of city planning in Baltimore, as a charter amendment was before the City Council to abolish the old City Planning Committee and create a new, more powerful Commission on City Plan. Future planning was becoming more and more important both to city officials and to the citizens of Baltimore. Planning was gaining wider acceptance nationally. The linkages to architecture, landscape

architecture, engineering, and fiscal policy were also becoming more comprehensive in nature.

The approach used by OBLA in 1904 became the standard model for present day comprehensive planning—taking an inventory, recognizing opportunities and constraints, incorporating citizen input, and developing strategies for implementation. The City's Comprehensive Master Plan—*LIVE · EARN · PLAY · LEARN: A Business Plan for a World Class City*, adopted in 2007 after three years of extensive community-wide planning, followed this model. An important early step in the first rezoning of Baltimore since 1971 was the creation of the new Parks and Open Space District Zone to identify and protect these valuable assets.

The guiding principles of the 1904 Report continue to endure. Olmsted Jr. believed in the "elegance of design—the creation of a composition in which all parts were subordinated to a single, coherent effect." Today, that composition includes more links between the stream valleys, parks and neighborhoods along the Gwynns Falls, Herring Run and Jones Falls to provide better public access to natural beauty and recreation. Extensions of the Gwynns Falls and Jones

Falls Trails, the “One Park” initiative, new Bicycle Master Plan, and the Middle Branch Plan increase connections to Baltimore’s natural environment for public enjoyment.

Maintenance and improvement of these connecting elements is paramount. The new City Comprehensive Plan will help guide this process as redevelopment occurs and older neighborhoods are preserved and strengthened. In addition, TreeBaltimore, the initiative to double Baltimore’s tree canopy from 20 to 40 percent within 30 years, will make Baltimore even more of what the Olmsteds intended. The Olmsted imperatives are more urgent than ever in light of climate change, shrinking resources, and increased population in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Much of what is now considered green design is part of the Olmsted legacy and more salient than ever. In examining the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System Neighborhood Development Pilot program, many Olmsted principles are on the rating list. The system gives points for projects that preserve historic buildings and provide walkable streets and access to public spaces.

As Baltimore City embarks on writing a Sustainability Plan over the next year, the issues of transit/multi-modal transportation, green spaces/parks, public health, and environmental justice issues will be discussed. While LEED-certified buildings, restoration projects, and City capital projects are now mandated to be phased in over the next few years, it is important that we use the 1904 and 1926 Olmsted Reports and later plans as major documents to guide the city’s development in this millennium.

—*Duncan Stuart, Planner, Baltimore City Department of Planning and FMOPL Board Member, with research assistance from Eric Holcomb, CHAP.*

Photo at upper right from FMOPL Archives. At lower right, photocopy of the Civic Centre Plan proposal from Olmsted Associates files, Library of Congress.

**Publication Design & Editing
by Sandra Sparks and Judy Dobbs**



CITY OF BALTIMORE
PROPOSED CIVIC CENTRE AND BOULEVARD TREATMENT OF JONES FALLS
JOHN M. CARRÈRE
ARNOLD W. BRUNNER
FREDERICK L. OLMSTED, JR.
ADVISORY COMMISSION, EMPLOYED JOINTLY BY THE MUNICIPAL ART SOCIETY AND THE MERCHANTS AND MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION

PLAN for grouping future public buildings of Baltimore, in connection with existing City Hall, Post Office, and Court House—CIVIC CENTRE PLAN—devised by Carrère, Brunner and Olmsted, experts employed jointly by the MUNICIPAL ART SOCIETY and the MERCHANTS & MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION.

The "CITY SENSIBLE" can be realized by providing in advance a plan. Then, as the need arises for a new public building, a city park, new street, avenue, fountain or monument, it will be located with reference to other projects, and the result will be a harmonious and beautiful whole. This way of doing it costs no more than the haphazard way. If, a few years ago, we had had the civic centre plan shown on this card, the federal government could easily have been persuaded to locate the new custom house there, instead of its being stuck away, as now, without a proper setting. The Civic Centre provides for a site for future public buildings east of our City Hall. Property in that neighborhood is at present at such a low ebb that it can be acquired comparatively cheap. All that is necessary for the present is that the city should acquire the property. It need not tear away any of the houses but may pursue the course followed in Cleveland, O., viz.: own and rent the buildings as landlord until a new public building is needed. Even the central plaza shown on the design need not be cleared until one or more public buildings are erected and the city finds itself more able than at present to establish the plaza. The city of Cleveland found that by grouping its public buildings and establishing a civic centre in a neighborhood where values were similarly low the sites for the buildings, with the plaza included, cost thirteen million dollars less than

if sites had been acquired, as they otherwise would have had to acquire them, on existing thoroughfares.

The Jones Falls Boulevard, indicated in the plan, can be created by covering Jones Falls, thus providing storm water sewers, removing a menace to health, creating a driveway on grade from the water-front to Union Station and beyond, and converting back lots into front lots. By acquiring the abutting property, which the city now has the right to do, and reselling at the increased value which must result from the improvement, a considerable part of the cost of the boulevard may be recovered.

At the hearing on November 19, 1909, Major Richard M. Venable said about the city plan: "I think every sensible man in Baltimore, when he comes to understand this plan, will be in favor of it * * * I am prepared to take the experience I had in the Park Board and prove that the sinking fund and interest can be provided out of the park tax." (The park tax is paid by the street railways and not by the taxpayer.) * * * "Now, the thing to do is to get that scheme in your minds and see how easily practicable it is as a financial question, and then go out to evangelize Baltimore. I believe some people here have undertaken to evangelize the whole world. You have got a much easier job on your hands."