

Roland Park



FMOPL Digest

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Living in Baltimore, one easily takes Roland Park for granted. It has the feel of a community grown organically from the landscape, as if houses and trees and roads somehow grew together seamlessly without difficulty or fracture. And that perception is partially correct. Roland Park was planned as a visual unit. Each element of architecture, landscape, and amenity was designed with the other elements in mind. That cross-referenced awareness of each part to the whole gives Roland Park its intangible quality of “rightness.” Yet the other half of the equation reminds us that communities such as Roland Park don’t just happen-- they are planned. Planning and its faithful execution are the key. Roland Park is the felicitous result of the collaboration between Edward Bouton and the Olmsted Brothers, especially Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. Bouton organized the Ro-

land Park Company in 1891 and capitalized it with funds from an English business syndicate seeking to invest in American real estate. The company bought two large estates, Oakland and Woodlawn, and several smaller ones to amass a holding of about 550 acres. George Kessler, an engineer from Kansas City, was hired to lay out Plat 1, which is east of Roland Avenue and north of Cold Spring Lane. Kessler had worked briefly with Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., on the construction of Central Park in New York. Plat 1, lying between the then existing rail lines running along the Stony Run Valley on the east and Roland Avenue on the west, was gentle

and mildly sloping. Kessler and Bouton used a modified grid plan for the streets and lanes but still retained the wooded look of the “romantic” tradition.

In 1893 Bouton made a brilliant move as a developer. He opened the Lake Roland Elevat-

ed electric train trolley to connect Roland Park with City Hall in downtown Baltimore and thus made commuting and year-round residency viable options. It is important to remember why

city dwellers would choose to commute. The repercussions of the Industrial Revolution caused city populations to swell--bringing slums, pollution, and crime, but no organized public policy to deal with the problems. Baltimore’s population quadrupled



*A typical pathway in Roland Park, 1911. Photo from *A Book of Pictures of Roland Park*, 1911.*

between 1840 and 1890. So when Bouton advertised in the newspaper that Roland Park on the city’s northern edge offered “pure water and scientific sewerage,” he knew well his reading audience.

Being a clever promoter and tireless worker, Bouton built the Wyatt and Nolting-designed shopping area in 1896 to give residents easy access to goods without going into the city. He organized the Baltimore Country Club in 1898 to appeal to the upwardly mobile. He also donated land for the Roland Park Women’s Club and to churches and schools, so that the community became self-contained. Most of these amenities are located on or near Roland Avenue,

and their inclusion in the plan was a strategy clearly directed at attracting buyers from the city.

Plat 2 and the Olmsted Brothers

Because sales were slow after the nationwide financial panic of 1893, it was not until 1901 that Bouton was ready to lay out Plat 2, the area west of Roland Avenue from Elmhurst Road to Cold Spring Lane. Here again Bouton showed brilliance as a developer and promoter. He hired the famous firm from Boston, the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects (OBLA), to do the planning. John Charles Olmsted and his younger step-brother Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., trained

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Roland Park Cottages on a Steep Hillside—Summer and Winter.
From *A Book of Pictures in Roland Park*, 1911.

with Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (uncle and father respectively), and fully imbibed his landscape design philosophy and principles. Roland Park exemplifies the pure Olmstedian tradition of design in the picturesque tradition. When the Olmsted Brothers went on to lay out Guilford and Homeland, they developed a more urban style which was influenced by the increasing popularity of the automobile and by a less rugged, more urban topography.

The topography of Plat 2 is quite different from Plat 1. It is hilly and heavily wooded with a series of high-ridged promontories overlooking the Jones Falls Valley. The Olmsteds turned what could have been a liability into an asset by taking great care in the handling of the steep slopes, preserving the woodland, and siting houses on the slopes, using sensitive grading and construction techniques. Roads followed the natural curvature of the terrain, thereby minimizing disruptive cut-and-fill and saving in the cost of construction. Narrow, winding streets discouraged traffic and allowed large areas of trees and undergrowth to be preserved. Cul-de-sacs terminated at the tops of ridges and gave homeowners spectacular views. Embracing the natural topography of the site, the Olmsteds created dramatic building lots and respected woodland resources.

By developing the land in this naturalistic way, the Olmsteds

could enhance the picturesque effect of their design. The quality of “picturesqueness” was derived from the English romantic vision of landscape scenery and its effects upon the viewer. Natural scenery and exposure to “Nature” were deemed to be beneficial and therapeutic, a philosophy which Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., strongly believed in and successfully passed on to his protégés.

A Successful Collaboration

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the remaining Plats 3 through 6 were laid out and developed. Bouton and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., were in frequent correspondence about plans for Roland Park. For example, Bouton asked the Olmsted firm to compile lists of names for streets, most of which had an English ring to them or had some reference to trees or plants. The choice of words evoked the countryside with all of its benefits, both real and imagined. For example, the term “road” was recommended, instead of “street,” because it sounded more naturalistic. Similarly, while the houses in Plat 1 had been called “cottages,” those in the later plats were called “villas.” Good design and clever marketing made Roland Park a smashing success.

During that first decade of development, the English investors withdrew their capital to reinvest it in diamond mines in Africa. Undeterred, Bou-

ton found local investors and continued as general manager. University Parkway was built in 1905 to connect the neighborhood to the major city arteries. In 1911, Edward Palmer, Jr., the noted local architect and Roland Park Company advisor, built his own home in Plat 2, and in 1916 Edward Bouton did the same. Bouton’s home, Rusty Rocks, built on a quarry site deemed unsaleable, was one of the very few private commissions that Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., accepted. Today, Rusty Rocks on Club Road remains a lovely example of residential landscape design.

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Bouton worked closely together on the development of Roland Park. Olmsted advised on grading and layout, orientation and grouping of the structures, planting trees and shrubbery, construction details, and styles and materials. Olmsted even advised Bouton’s Roland Park Company on office and document management. It was a true collaboration.

One of the Olmstedian planning techniques that made Roland Park such a desirable place was the creation of a hierarchical road system. The major roads ran in front of houses, while service lanes were at the rear. Sidewalks paralleled most streets, and a crisscrossing system of footpaths went throughout the neighborhood to encourage residents to walk. The convenience of the lanes and paths was most ob-

vious in the connections they made to the trolley. Then as now, the pedestrian network of these paths helped to entice residents into neighborly communion. The Olmsteds believed that a community is an extension of the family. Both public and private space must be provided, so that family life is cultivated in the context of community. This hierarchy of movement in Roland Park facilitated both.

Covenants and Governance

The use of restrictive covenants in Roland Park is a planning technique with a checkered history. Restrictions still in effect regulate land use, architectural construction, setbacks, and similar aesthetic considerations. Regrettably, in the early years these covenants were also used to exclude ethnic minorities, but those objectionable portions of the covenants were declared unenforceable in 1948.

For additional governance of the community, the Roland Park Company formed the Roland Park Civic League in 1895 as a community forum, and it was incorporated in 1907. Two years later the Roland Park Roads and Maintenance Committee was formed to provide services within the community. The most recent addition along these lines is the Roland Park Community Foundation, established in 1987 for the purpose of raising funds for community enhancements. In 1974,

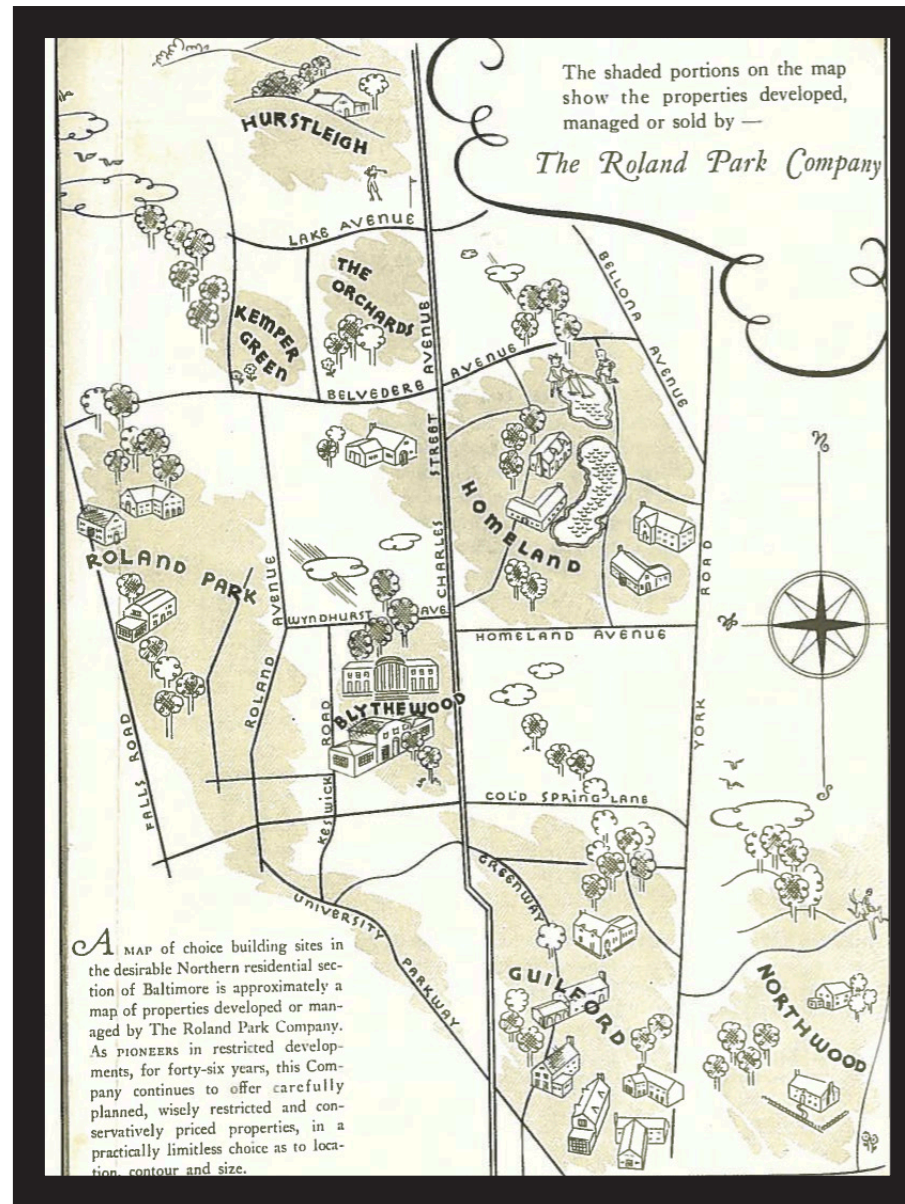


Illustration from *Gardens, Houses and People*, Vol. XII, No. 4, April 1937, published by The Roland Park Company.

Roland Park was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

A Landmark of Design and Planning

Many noted architects designed homes in Roland Park. In addition to Palmer, Laurence Hall Fowler, Ellicott and Emmart, William Lamdin, and New York architect Charles Platt have examples of their work in the community. In 1902, Charles Platt laid out Goodwood Gardens, the notable exception to the picturesque design tradition prevailing throughout the neighborhood.

The Olmsted Brothers' involvement with Roland Park did not stop at the neighborhood level. They sited St. Mary's Seminary, arguing successfully that it should be built at the top of the hill rather than in the flood plain as originally planned. The firm was involved in various capacities with The Roland Park Country School, Friends School, and the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen.

The neighborhood of Roland Park is a nationally acclaimed landmark that teaches us the value of good planning and effective design. It's not something to take for granted.

— Judith Smith, *Landscape Designer*, with special thanks to Judy Dobbs, Marianne Kreitner, Ann Lundy, and Sandra Sparks

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