

# **Book Review: A Clearing in The Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the 19th Century**

**By Witold Rybczinski**  
**Reviewed by Lesley Lambert**

*"I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the Future."  
~Frederick Law Olmsted*

Without the influence of innovators such as Frederick Law Olmsted, America would likely look very different. Among many things, Olmsted is often referred to as the father of American landscape architecture. He is famous for designing many well-known urban parks, including Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City, South Park in Chicago, Illinois, and the Emerald Necklace in Boston, Massachusetts, to name just a few. But he was also a towering figure in a startling number of other fields. He was a journalist, a scientific farmer and a businessman. As author Witold Rybczinski describes it "he simply wasn't satisfied with the hand he had been dealt—comfortable though it was. It was as if he had decided to reshuffle the cards—more than once." Olmsted dabbled in surveying, apprenticed as a clerk, took a green hand position on a voyage to China and another to England, and became a farm hand all before he turned 23.

He became an accomplished writer and editor, first with Putnam's Monthly Magazine, and later commissioned by New York Times (then the New York Daily Times) to write knowledgeably about the material conditions of everyday life in the Southern slave states. He published several books on his travels to the South and made his opinions against slavery well known. During the Civil War, he took leave as superintendent of Central Park to work as Executive Secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a precursor to the Red Cross in Washington, D.C.. His organizational skills wholly improved the medical relief effort for the U.S. Military.

But it's the invention of the field of landscape architecture for which he is most known. As architect-in-chief and superintendant of Central Park, Olmsted oversaw the design, maintenance and a staff of nearly 2,000. Central Park was the largest public works project in the country at a time of recession and high unemployment. It was, as Rybczinski notes, "For mid nineteenth century Americans ....a magical place. Not just a pretty setting for recreation, it was an aesthetic experience." Drawing on Andrew Jackson Downing's vision for the park Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux, created the winning design for the park titled Greensward. Downing's insight was that "pedestrians would find quiet and

secluded walks when they wished to be solitary and broad alleys filled with thousands of happy faces when they would be gay." Olmsted, Downing, and Vaux shared the notion that people needed clean open spaces to get away from the dense, loud city life. Until Central Park was established, the public used cemeteries as picnic grounds—which began when the first consecrated cemetery, Mount Auburn, was established in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1831.



Frederick Law Olmsted lived from 1822 to 1903. This is an oil painting of Olmsted by John Singer Sargent, 1895.

Until Central Park was commissioned, no one in the United States had any experience building such a large park, and had no idea of the great costs involved. When construction first began the park commissioners authorized \$1.5 million for construction, but costs quickly rose past \$13 million (in 1859 dollars). And as of 2007, the Central Park Conservancy—a private, nonprofit organization that manages the park—had invested approximately \$450 million in the restoration and management of the park.

Witold Rybczinski has done a fabulous job cataloguing Oldmsted's life. He peppers in his own personal experiences of his travels to Olmsted's parks and opinions of Olmsted's character into the detailed accounts and meticulously cited research. Rybczinski paints colorful portraits of events through vignettes and quotes directly from letters, articles and books by Olmsted and his colleagues.

*A Clearing in the Distance* is not merely a biography of Frederick Law Olmsted. It is also a portrait of American life in the nineteenth century. It is an entertaining read and offers an accurate account of an important era in American History. It reads nothing like a textbook, yet provides more than enough historical facts.

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## Central Park, New York

*It takes decades to realize the landscape architect's vision. Patience and long-sightedness were among Olmsted's chief qualities.*



The freshly graded Mall in 1863, shortly after completion with rows of American elm saplings.



Central Park today is the vision Olmsted had when he first embarked on designing "Greensward" with his partner Calvert Vaux. This photo of the Mall was taken in the same area as the photo above.