Exploring the Olmsted Legacy in Washington

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The History of the City Beautiful Movement and The Olmsted Legacy (The Idea)

The privatization of urban spaces is becoming more ubiquitous, which makes the importance of public parks even greater. The public park spaces in Washington state, designed by the Olmsted brothers, is what makes the landscape so unique. The City Beautiful movement’s architect’s intentions were to create spaces where nature and humans could coexist.

Frederick Law Olmsted’s desire to beautify cities was passed down to his son and step son, Frederick Law Olmsted and John Charles Olmsted. Right before their father’s death in 1903, Seattle reached out to the sons for park designs (Hockaday 1). The Olmsted architectural firm was sought after for designing the parks because of their impressive architectural past of Beautifying cities. A hallmark of Frederick senior’s designs was Central Park in New York City. After this, the Olmsted Brothers legacy on the west coast began in Oregon in 1903-1920 (Hockaday 19). In Oregon they designed several college campuses, country clubs, parks and even private residences. They had a total of around 27 clients (Hockaday 19). Seattle was a much larger project. The Olmsted brothers designed around 37 parks total, and over 125 other spaces (Hockaday 49).

Examples of Olmstedian architecture is the use of native species of plants in his parks, allowing the landscape to take its natural shape, and oftentimes leaving sites fairly untouched. All of these ideas demonstrate that the landscape does not need design to be beautiful. Olmsted wanted parks to be a less crowded space than the city. He thought that the streets of cities did not have designated space for play and traveling, which he implemented in parks. In parks, FLO designed paths to keep to the ups and downs of the natural landscape (42 Ott and Staff). The curvature of the natural roads caused them to appear longer than they were, which gave parks a depth they did not actually have (42). Olmsted also wanted to have several different architectural features to his parks, creating full landscapes.

The Parks

One can see many examples of Olmstedian architecture in Seward park. When walking through the park, one can see that there is a focus on the Bay surrounding the green space. There are also hiking and walking paths that travel along the outside of Seward park to give one the entire view of the bay. As well as the planned areas, Seward park has designated areas where there is forest. This focus allows the individual to be even more secluded from the rest of the park, and it showcases the natural features of the park and the native plants. Having all of these elements included shows off the diverse ecosystem Seattle has to offer.

Another park with many different features is Washington park. Here there are Japanese gardens, a pond, and even a “Lookout Gazebo” dedicated to the Olmsted brothers firm. The gazebo is both beautiful in itself, but is also used as a tool to look over the pond and the rest of the site.

A significant feature of Frink Park are its flowy paths. Frink Park is located on a hillside right by the water. This hillside makes it difficult for one to travel up and down the steep hillside. The curving paths, a feature of the Olmsted legacy, allows the park to be more accessible and provides this space with a more natural setting.

The Importance of Parks

The parks that represent the city beautiful movement show civic virtue in the way that people play with the space, but also in the planning of the city. The way the Olmsted firm approaches a site shows intense thought and pride in the natural elements of the landscape.

More than physically, parks practice the ideology of the Olmsted legacy. There are many different types of people interacting with the space in a number of different ways. Parks consist of what makes cities so unique from other spaces in America. They are densely packed with bright eyed young people wanting to create a better world through connection and understanding. Parks are hot spots in city centers for young people to do this. Especially after the pandemic, it shows how resilient these spaces are. No matter what is occurring in city centers, individuals crave green spaces and the type of comradery that they bring.

References


Seward Park

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References

