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FOOTSTEPS

Jewels of Olmsted's Unspoiled Midwest

Sally Ryan for The New York Times

In Jackson Park in Chicago, the serene Japanese garden, part of the Wooded Island designed by Olmsted, is a reconstruction; the original Japanese garden was destroyed by fire in the 1940s.

By Justin Martin

FEW people can claim to know America as deeply as Frederick Law Olmsted did. During a long, full and peripatetic life (1822-1903), he

crisscrossed the country by rail, stagecoach, horseback and on foot. “I was born for a traveler,” he once said.

Through experience obtained during childhood journeys and brief careers as a journalist and a superintendent of an ill-starred gold mine in the Sierra Nevada range in California, Olmsted gained an intimate knowledge of the American landscape that served him superbly in the role for which he is best remembered — the country’s pioneering park maker.

Much attention is given to Olmsted’s creations on the Eastern Seaboard, including Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City, and the Emerald Necklace in Boston. But he is also responsible for public spaces elsewhere, most notably in the Midwest. Olmsted, ceaselessly creative, was much more than a designer of parks. He was constantly suggesting different kinds of landscapes to meet varied needs and demands.

Ever the reformer, he was also drawn to the notion that landscape architecture could serve various social engineering purposes, providing respite from teeming cities, say, or forcing people of varied backgrounds to mix and mingle. He once described his park work as a “democratic development of the highest significance.”

Here, then, is a look at some of his work in the Midwest — lesser-known than his most famous projects, but still life-changing for millions of Americans.

Jackson Park, Chicago

Recognizing that the pomp of the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago had the potential to overwhelm visitors, Olmsted was intent on creating a landscape that would act as a soothing naturalistic counterpoint. First, he selected the fair's site, singling out a parcel on the city's South Side. Years earlier, Olmsted and Calvert Vaux — his collaborator on early works like Central Park — had designed a park for this very spot, but little of their plan had been executed.

Working solo, Olmsted set out to complete the park, which was by then chosen for fairgrounds. He created an intricate network of lagoons, so that visitors could travel through the fair on small boats. He also repurposed muck that was dredged to create the lagoons in order to bulk up a lonely little hillock into the 16-acre Wooded Island, which he planted with hemlock and other trees.

During the fair, Teddy Roosevelt thought it was the ideal spot to set up his Boone and Crockett hunting club, but Olmsted said no to the future president and other exhibitors who wanted a piece of his island. He intended it, he wrote in a letter, as "a place of relief from all the splendor and glory and noise and human multitudinousness of the great surrounding Babylon."

The famous White City — a collection of neo-Classical buildings lined with electric lights, a dazzling new invention at the time — is mostly long gone. But Olmsted's fairgrounds, now known as Jackson Park, remain. Within its 600 acres, you can still find stretches of the original lagoons. The Wooded Island is still there, too, and it's my favorite part of the park: an oasis of calm smack in the center of hectic Chicago.

Riverside, Ill.

Just nine miles outside Chicago is Riverside, one of America's first true suburbs, designed in 1868 by Olmsted and Vaux. It's a triumph of subtle social engineering, full of thoughtful design touches meant to foster a sense of community; any well-thought-out modern suburb owes a debt to Riverside. Mingling of residents is pretty much guaranteed, for example, thanks to the fact that half of the community's 1,176 acres are set aside for commons and other green spaces. All the streets gently curve, an Olmsted signature, meant to promote "leisure, contemplativeness and happy tranquillity," as he put it, and to provide a stark contrast to the angular street scheme and harried atmosphere of Chicago. Olmsted also named many of the roads, often to honor his literary heroes: Akenside, Carlyle, Shenstone.

Over the years, the Riverside design has also provided a canvas for houses designed by notable architects. There are two Frank Lloyd Wright houses, as well as gardener's cottages and other structures. And there are works by modern masters, including a John Vinci-designed house from 1976. To experience fully the neighborhood and its prominent homes, arrange a tour through the Frederick Law Olmsted Society of Riverside (708-442-7675; olmstedsociety.org).

Milwaukee Park System

Not long after completing Central Park, Olmsted — restless, ambitious, brimming with outré ideas — began trying to reimagine the very concept of a park. He started seeking ways to furnish more green space to more neighborhoods, fostering more mixing of people and more democracy. His solution: the park system. In 1868, Olmsted and Vaux

started work on the world's first park system for Buffalo (it would take another 30 years to complete). By 1893, when Olmsted went to Milwaukee (decades after his partnership with Vaux had dissolved) he had perfected the concept, having designed systems in Louisville, Rochester and Boston. Olmsted's execution was elegant: instead of a single park, he conceived a collection of them, each boasting different attractive landscape attributes.

For Milwaukee, Olmsted designed a three-park system, made up of Lake, Riverside and Washington Parks. On a recent sunny Sunday afternoon, I visited all three. Lake Park is the jewel of the bunch. I loved exploring its deep ravines, laced with walking paths that faithfully follow Olmsted's winding courses. At certain points, clumps of trees block the view, a classic Olmsted trick. What's in the distance, you naturally wonder? Soon enough, you encounter an intentional break in the foliage, opening up a vista. It's only then that you realize you're on a tall bluff, Lake Michigan spreading out endlessly before you.

In each park, people were everywhere. I paused in Washington Park to watch some hard-charging adults play soccer in a match that pitted a team called Palo Alto against one called San José. It turned out that this was an old-country rivalry; the team names were the towns in Mexico from which the players hailed.

On departing Riverside Park — untamed, rural feeling — I walked past a stand of Norway maples, some originally planted by Olmsted, and onto busy Oakland Avenue, a commercial strip that features Greek, Thai and Middle Eastern restaurants. It felt like an extension of Olmsted's democratic vision.

Belle Isle Park, Detroit

Belle Isle is a large island park of almost 1,000 acres, situated in the Detroit River, a striking setting. Of all the parks I visited, it's the most bittersweet for fans of Olmsted's work: a beloved but hard-used space that retains scant traces of his original design. Over the years, various pursuits have been embraced, then forgotten, leaving behind elements frozen in time. An African animal menagerie from the 1970s now sits abandoned, its ersatz hutlike structures graffiti-tagged and in deep disrepair. In another spot, there's an ugly parking lot, a vestige of Grand Prix auto races held, until recently, on the island.

One wonderful exception is a system of canals that runs through the park. In Olmsted's original plan, he touted these as "highways of pleasure, in which boats would be used instead of carriages." The canals, as built, never followed Olmsted's exact blueprint, but they are certainly faithful to his intent, full of sinuous curves.

I took a boat tour of the canals, accompanied by Keith Flournoy, Belle Isle's ever-resourceful park manager. (We were in a small, motorized launch, but you could get pretty much the same experience by renting a paddleboat.) We glided past weeping willows and under a series of wonderfully varied footbridges. "This is how Olmsted meant this park to be seen," Mr. Flournoy said.

Presque Isle, Marquette, Mich.

Many people don't realize that, in addition to his work creating parks and other urban spaces, Olmsted played a crucial role in the preservation of natural places like Yosemite and Niagara. In 1891, he traveled from Chicago, where he was working on the fairgrounds, to

Marquette, then a tiny town in the wilds of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Ostensibly, his purpose was to design the grounds surrounding the local millionaire mayor's mansion, now long gone. While visiting Marquette, though, Olmsted was shown a beautiful piece of land just three miles outside town. He was asked to draw up a management plan, perhaps to suggest even how it might be turned into a proper park. Instead, he put on his environmentalist hat and wrote a letter praising the land and cautioning that it "should not be marred by the intrusion of artificial objects." The letter was taken as gospel and to this day Presque Isle remains a slice of unsullied wilderness.

I was told to expect wildlife, so I arrived right at dawn. But I have to admit to what can be described only as a city slicker's insecurity: What if I don't see a single creature? Within moments of entering the park, my fears were put to rest. I saw a deer, then another and another. Soon I became aware of all kinds of chirps and squawks and trills. Apparently — I have no skills as a birder — Presque Isle, which is a peninsula that juts out into Lake Superior, is a major flyway for all kinds of winged creatures, including gnatcatchers, whippoorwills, even snowy owls.

But the most amazing thing about Presque Isle is its size: a mere 323 acres — a bite-size piece of wilderness, yet endlessly interesting. I remained there all day. The highlight was watching a sunset against a backdrop of Lake Superior, Huron Mountains in the distance and a sprawling sky.

The next day, I returned to civilization. On the way to the airport, though, I just couldn't help myself, and took one last hike through tiny, unspoiled Presque Isle.

In its final report, the Olmsted firm provided a recommendation for this lovely piece of land: “Preserve it, treasure it, as little altered as may be for all time.”

JUSTIN MARTIN is the author of “Genius of Place: The Life of Frederick Law Olmsted” (Da Capo Press).

Darren Hauck for The New York Times

In Milwaukee, parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted include Lake Park on the waterfront.

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Riverside Park, in the heart of the Milwaukee's East Side neighborhood, was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

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