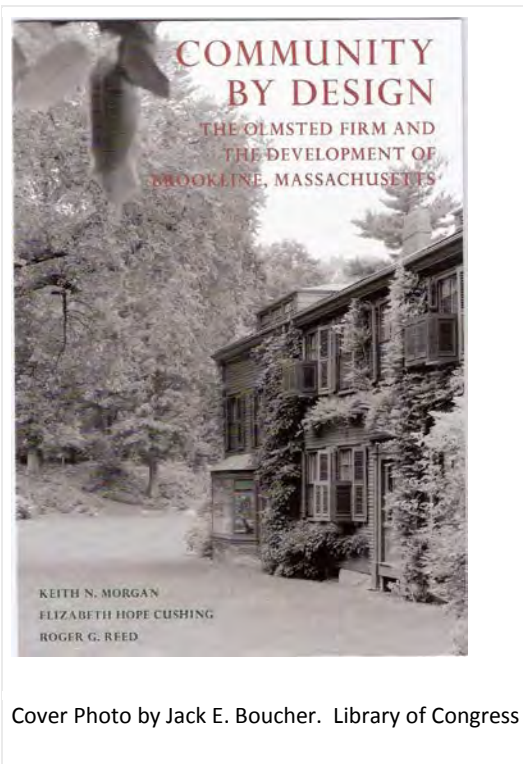


Brookline Perspective

Friday, March 22, 2013

[Community by Design: The Olmsted Firm and the Development of Brookline, MA](#)



I suspect there will be a great deal of interest in this new book, *Community by Design: The Olmsted Firm and The Development of Brookline, Massachusetts*, by Keith Morgan, Elizabeth Hope Cushing and Roger Reed. Published by the Library of American Landscape History, University of Massachusetts Press. Anyone interested in understanding why Brookline looks the way it does will find plenty of fodder here. Olmsted enthusiasts will get an in-depth glimpse into the workings of the firm with plenty of real world examples of their design philosophy; first delineated in plan form and then realized in our neighborhoods. Chock full of details (with hundreds of reproduced photos and plans) and meticulously researched, the book exposes the multiple webs of influence; wealth, social hierarchy, design genius and high-minded ideals that came together to guide the development of Brookline at a time when booming population and streetcars brought rapid change. The authors trace the relationships among the leading trend-setters in architecture, municipal governance, landscape design, engineering and horticulture as they converge in Brookline at the turn of the 19th century, a time when the professions of landscape architecture and urban planning were being born by these very individuals. The book sets these events into a broader context, describing the forces that drew these taste-makers to Brookline in the first place and the process by which they came to see their home as a template for an ideal residential setting.

Henry Hobson Richardson, Charles Sprague Sargent, Charles Eliot, Arthur Shurcliff, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., John Charles Olmsted, Guy Lowell, J. Randolph Coolidge and Robert Swain Peabody are some of the design and horticulture luminaries that circulated within the elder Olmsted's sphere.

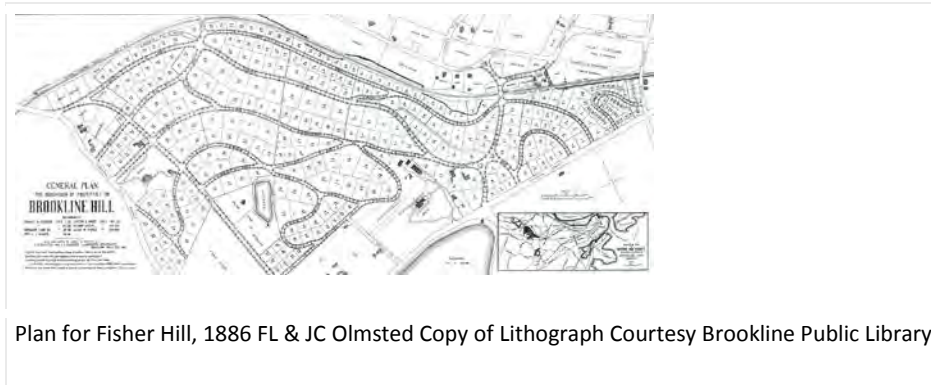


Charles Eliot 1882 Courtesy family of Carola Eliot Goriensky

Imagine a world before graduate schools churned out thousands of architects and city planners a year. This book gives us an inside look at the birth of numerous allied professions. The first American school of architecture was established at MIT in 1867. Locating a practice, as H.H. Richardson did in 1874 in nearby Brookline, allowed for a symbiotic relationship between mentor and neophyte, his practice blurred home and office, school and work life, much like the Paris atelier he came from. In late 19th century America there were no professional schools for landscape architects until 1900 when F.L.Olmsted Jr. and Arthur Shurcliff oversaw the creation of a program in landscape architecture at Harvard University. Prior to that, it was through internship at the Olmsted firm that one gained the necessary skills to practice. Charles Eliot, was the very first such intern, who later went on to found the Trustees of Reservations, due to his deep understanding and passion for planning on a regional scale.

In these early days, practitioners were free to apply their talents to best advantage, and in some cases, such as when F.L. Olmsted Jr. was asked to assist with the subdivision of "Holm Lea", the Sargent Estate, they conditioned their professional involvement upon being given control over all aspects of a development. They understood that the outcome would be enhanced if all aspects of site design, architecture, landscaping, road design, etc. were executed from a unified perspective. In the case of the Sargent Estate, the heirs were reluctant to give such control to the younger Olmsted. Due in large part to a history of wealth and insular governance, as well as the presence of these civic-minded design

professionals, Brookline established one of the first Planning Commissions in Massachusetts, in 1914, with F.L. Olmsted Jr. serving as its first chair. We follow the story of the birth of city planning as F.L. Olmsted Jr., in 1910 founded the first national organization of city planners, the National Conference on City Planning. Brookline was one of the first municipalities to adopt a zoning by-law, doing so in 1922, just two years after state enabling legislation was passed in 1920.



Unlike the hyper-specialization in today's professional world, F.L. Olmsted saw the big picture and could envision change well into the future. Olmsted's skills and practice reached far beyond the limited role landscape architects are forced to inhabit today. He did not approach his commissions from a purely "aesthetic" point of view, instead he operated more as a problem solver, applying a few key principles consistently. His understanding of the benefits of working with nature, such as respecting and working with existing topography, and utilizing the natural flows of water are again in vogue today as influential landscape designers champion the use of native plants, minimal soil disruption and existing water supplies instead of the heavy-handed Army Corps of Engineers approach prevalent in the intervening years. We see in the design for "Brookline Hill", later renamed Fisher Hill, how Olmsted laid out curving roadways to take advantage of views and create a meandering feel. He also, to achieve his client's goal, created large lots for spacious homes, complete with deed restrictions.

Olmsted had a profound insight into what today we call "environmental psychology" he knew how people responded to certain settings and he knew how to create those settings and experiences. He could envisage the experience of calm pleasure and peacefulness that ensues from traversing a curvy and tree-lined roadway. All of his plans, including Central Park, Beacon St. and the Emerald Necklace flowed from first designing appropriate transportation and linkages. In fact, we would perhaps not be experiencing the levels of traffic congestion present today, had the planning professions absorbed the lessons to be learned from the separation of travel mode which were an innovation inherent in all Olmsted plans.



Sketch of Proposed Brookside Roads in Upper Brookline 1894 Courtesy National Park Service, F.L. Olmsted N.H.S.

Development pressures were great and reading this book we learn how the families of wealth and influence who lived in South Brookline hired the Olmsted firm to help them ward off plans for intensive development. Rather than a narrowly focused response, the firm took a more comprehensive tact, proposing a network of parkways as an antecedent to future growth. The plan included a partway linking Jamaica Pond with the Brookline Reservoir.

Community by Design will inform scholarship on a great many subjects, and as a resident of Brookline, I am grateful for the depth of insight to be gained from reading about such a pivotal time in our history and the people who helped shape our landscape. The Olmsted firm worked on hundreds of projects for the town and the town's land owners, with their keen insight creating much of landscape we enjoy today.

BY LINDA PEHLKE