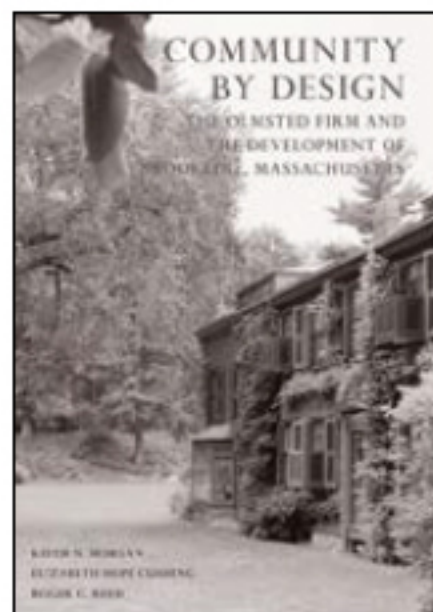


## **Community by Design: The Olmsted Firm and the Development of Brookline, Massachusetts**

**Keith N. Morgan,  
Elizabeth Hope Cushing, and  
Roger G. Reed**

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Massachusetts Press in  
Association with Library of  
American Landscape  
History, 2013.

Residents of Brookline, Massachusetts, take pride in their historic, progressive, and beautiful community. This is as true today as it was in 1841, when Andrew J. Downing wrote, “The whole of this neighborhood of Brookline is a kind of landscape garden, and there is nothing in America, of the sort, so inexpressibly charming as the lanes which lead from one cottage, or villa, to another. . . . and the open gates, with tempting vistas and glimpses under the pendent boughs, give it quite an Arcadian air of rural



freedom and enjoyment.”<sup>1</sup> Birthplace of a martyred president, workplace of the country’s first landscape architect, and home to a clutch of distinguished Boston architects, the town has always attracted high-achieving individuals from a wide variety of vocations.

Naturally, Brookline is no longer as Arcadian and rural as it was in Downing’s day, yet the place is remarkably well preserved. A glance at a map of Boston and its surroundings shows why. Bos-

ton consists of a central business district and several outlying residential neighborhoods. Brookline is squeezed between two of the most westerly of these, Brighton and Jamaica Plain. It sticks into

the city proper almost like a splinter, the result of the town’s vote in 1873 to reject annexation, chosen by all its close neighbors with the temporary exception of Hyde Park, which voted for annexation in 1904. In 2014, Brookline remains politi-

cally independent, governed by a board of selectmen and a representative town meeting rather than a “strong” mayor and relatively powerless city council, as is Boston. Day-to-day affairs in Brookline are supervised by a full-time town manager.

The Olmsteds’ impact on Brookline was considerable. Between 1879, when Frederick Law Olmsted laid out the grounds of the Barthold Schlesinger property at 278 Warren Street and 1936, when Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. relocated to California, the firm designed about 170 properties in Brookline. This was perhaps a record – not only for Olmsted-designed landscapes in Brookline, but also for their work in any other town of comparable size. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the development of either the place or the practice without the other. *Community by Design* is the story of the first two generations of the Olmsted firm and its projects in the remarkable town that became its home base.

In 1881, Brookline joined with Boston to commission Frederick Law Olmsted to design the Muddy River Improvement, a linear park. Its central feature was a narrow, slow-moving stream, which straddled the two communities, forming the second link in the Boston park system after Boston’s Back Bay Fens, then under

construction. Increasingly, from this time onwards, the firm’s other projects – including numerous private commissions and work for the Boston Park Commission – were located in Brookline and neighboring Boston. In 1883, Olmsted decided to move both his home and his office from New York, buying an existing farmhouse in Brookline, which he named Fairsted. He laid out the grounds – slightly under two acres – with the help of his stepson, John Charles Olmsted, and added a rambling office wing that expanded over time as the firm acquired more work and more employees.

Multigenerational firms are rather rare in any profession, with the possible exception of the law. For a firm of architects or landscape architects to launch a successor firm that survives for more than a generation, several things need to happen. First of all, the firm must be led by a strong artistic personality, often an extrovert with a dynamic manner who can both inspire and dominate his employees, as well as “sell” his ideas to his clients. Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, is a prime example. By contrast, Olmsted

was an introvert. And yet he had unusual powers of persuasion, both with members of his firm and clients, although his manner was low-key, never flamboyant. I believe that Olmsted was able to convince his clients that his ideas were theirs, which may have been the secret of his striking success, in spite of periodic, painful setbacks, as the leader of an infant profession. Secondly, in order to maintain the same office address over an extended period of time – a decided advantage – the firm should own its own real estate: the building itself and, in the case of a suburban or rural location like Olmsted’s, the land around it. Thirdly, the successor firm must include a member of the founder’s family, in this period nearly always a son but, very occasionally, a son-in-law. The Olmsted firm fills the bill on all three counts, contributing two sons to the enterprise, although both John Charles and his half brother Rick had initially planned other careers.<sup>2</sup>

The backgrounds of the authors of *Community by Design* are complementary. Keith N. Morgan is professor of art history and director of architectural studies at Boston University, and the author, coauthor, or editor of several books, including

<sup>2</sup> John Charles Olmsted had two daughters and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. had one. Neither had a son.

*Charles A. Platt: The Artist as Architect* (1985) and, with Richard M. Candee, Naomi Miller, and Roger G. Reed, *Buildings of Massachusetts: Metropolitan Boston* (2009). Elizabeth Hope Cushing, an independent scholar, is the author of several cultural landscape reports and the book *Arthur A. Shurcliff: Design, Preservation, and the Creation of the Colonial Williamsburg Landscape* (2014). Roger G. Reed is a historian for the National Register of Historic Places and the National Landmarks Program, who previously served first as the chief architectural historian for the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and then in the same capacity for the Brookline Preservation Commission. Few people know Brookline’s history and architecture in as much depth as Reed. His books include *A Delight to All Who Know It: The Maine Summer Architecture of William R. Emerson* (1990).

Of the eight chapters in *Community by Design*, Cushing wrote two, both biographical in nature: one an overview of Olmsted’s life and career before he came to Brookline and the other a summary of the life of Charles Sprague Sargent,

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Downing, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, Adapted to North America (New York: A. O. Moore, 1859), 40. The first edition was published in 1841.



chairman of Brookline's park commission and director of Harvard's Arnold Arboretum. Reed contributed a valuable chapter on the town's planning context. His detailed discussion of the numerous subdivisions, large and small, designed by the firm in Brookline under the direction of both the elder Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., is particularly useful. Because they are highly vulnerable to economic cycles, subdivisions are rarely completed as part of a single building campaign. They are generally planned and the first stages of construction begun in a boom period but are often either still-born or truncated during a bust period. Yet previous discussions of the Olmsted firm's work in subdivision planning have focused on those few examples where an entire, discrete community of considerable size was the result, including Riverside near Chicago by the senior Olmsted and Forest Hills Gardens in Queens, New York, by Olmsted Brothers. The lion's share of this book is the work of Morgan, who wrote the remaining five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The nine appendices are unattributed.

With so much emphasis on context, the main thread of the narrative could have been obscured, but that did

not happen. My one quibble with this fine book concerns the cut-off date. Although 1936 seems a reasonable point to break off, it is not quite the end of the story. Yes, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. relocated to California, but it was not to go into full retirement. Rather, he was still working with the firm on the layout of the Palos Verdes Estates, located on a spectacularly scenic peninsula that thrusts into the Pacific south of Los Angeles. Here Olmsted had his West Coast home, although he frequently returned to the Brookline office to monitor ongoing projects. There, he met and sometimes worked with a new landscape architect, Artemas P. Richardson, who had joined the firm shortly after World War II in part because Olmsted Jr., who was colorblind, could not design planting plans.<sup>3</sup> After Olmsted's death in 1950, Richardson changed the name of the firm to Olmsted Associates. In a second edition of *Community by Design*, a brief discussion of the third and last generation of the Olmsted firm would be desirable, perhaps as a tenth appendix.

– Cynthia Zaitzevsky

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Zaitzevsky, conversation with Artemas P. Richardson at Olmsted Associates (Fairsted), ca. 1972. Joseph M. Hudak joined the firm somewhat later but left a few years before Richardson.