

Greensward: Lan[d]scape and Social Reform

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In 1858, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux created Greensward, their plan for a major public park to be called Central Park, located in Manhattan, New York City. The aim of the plan was to provide a world class park for all of the residents of New York to enjoy. By the time construction was complete, Central Park provided a true rural experience within an urban context. However, Central Park was not created solely for the purpose of creating an aesthetically pleasing landscape. Olmsted and Vaux's design was influenced by a democratic social reform agenda. While Central Park still exists as an exquisite landscape, it is clear that the original design intent and social reform agenda has been damaged over time.

While the Greensward Plan for Central Park was a collaboration between Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, history has viewed the partnership as unequal. Olmsted, who had no formal training in landscape design at the time of developing the Greensward Plan, is often considered the brain behind the project. Vaux on the other hand, was a formally trained architect, who had the skills to turn Olmsted's ideas into a plan (Rogers, 1972, p. 20). Despite Vaux being more qualified, he has not been recognised as a public figure to the same extent as Olmsted (Fein, 1967, p.43). However, they both played a significant role in the development of the plan. Olmsted worked on the plan at an unrelenting pace for 5 months, viewing the landscape as his canvas on which to develop a beautiful work of art. At night, Vaux would pace over its acres and argue out each of the plans features, and formalise them (Rogers, 1972, p. 21). On the 1st of April, 1858, Olmsted and Vaux submitted their Greensward Plan and were subsequently awarded the right to develop Central Park (Rogers, 1972, p. 20).

Olmsted's influences are easy to identify. From an architectural perspective, Olmsted was inspired by the work of Beaux Arts architects such as Henry Hobson Richardson - who were gaining prominence at the time of Central Park's construction - while dismissing neoclassicism (Rogers, 1972, p. 7). Artistically, two books, Sir Uvedale Price's *On the picturesque* and William Gilpin's *Forest Scenery*, left a deep impression on Olmsted. Price argued in favour of landscape art which was naturalistic, rather than formal and rigid, while Gilpin evaluated various species of trees for their aesthetic qualities (Rogers, 1987, p. 11) and promoted scenes and landscapes which conformed with the rules of painting. Beyond art and architecture, Olmsted had a keen interest in society.

Initially, Olmsted promoted the merits of an agrarian society. Yet Olmsted's birth coincided with the birth of technology in America (Rogers, 1972, p. 5). By the time he developed his plan for Central Park, he had become a supporter of urban rather than rural communities. Olmsted identified how developments in technology and transport was changing the methods of farm production, how rural areas were becoming dysfunctional and more dependant on cities. He began to view the Southern United States, which was predominantly agrarian and dependant on slave labour as primitive – a large scale social disaster. In his mind, the development of social institutions and culture accessible to all citizens, not just a privileged few, could only occur in urban environments (Fein, 1967, pp. 12-31). However, Olmsted was able to understand the concerns that agrarians had with urban living.

Olmsted was able to identify problems with the city which separated him from many of his urban contemporaries. In mid 19th century New York few felt that progress and nature were incompatible. There little concern about about the development of new cities and rapid expansion of old ones, nor the lack of beauty in cities (Rogers, 1972, p. 5). Olmsted expressed concern that the dedication of the city to commerce and industry, was increasing rates of social illness. Central Park, through its design, was Olmsted's attempt at rectifying some of these social ills. (Fein, 1967, pp. 33-36). Yet Central Park was not the first time that social reform through the establishment of public space was suggested.

A large public park in New York had long been on the agenda but none were ever constructed. As early as 1785, there had been supporters of such parks, with momentum in the movement building in the early 19th century, with many proposals for different parks (Taylor, 1999, pp. 426-427). Olmsted (1967) claimed that an alternative proposal, Jones Wood, was not constructed due to political and economic interests (p. 52). Similarly, Heckscher & Robinson (1977) highlight the reasons Central Park was chosen:

... in its actual location, Central Park made a statement about the character of Manhattan Island. It indicated among other things that this rocky stretch of terrain, pockmarked and marshy, was somewhat less than desirable for the kind of real estate development envisioned for the growing city (p. 72).

In fact, the name Central Park was only given to differentiate it from the Jones Wood proposal. The site was by no means the centre of the city at this stage. However, Olmsted and Vaux imagined a time where all the nature from around the park had been stripped and that the park would become the centre of the city. The plan Olmsted and Vaux envisaged would be the antidote to this sea of urbanism (Rogers, 1972, p. 21).

The intention of Olmsted's design was to provide a rural experience in the city. The aim was to offer an "unlimited range of natural conditions – an artful blend of pastoral and woodland scenery" (Rogers, 1972, p. 21). To achieve this, the Greensward plan called for a line of trees to be built around the park between the pavement and the street, shielding out the view of the surrounding buildings (Rogers, 1972, p. 22). One of the requirements of the park was to have four east-west roads traversing the park. These roads could have detracted from the rural experience. However, Olmsted and Vaux specified that the roads should be constructed below grade and through tunnels, preventing visitors to the park from seeing them. (Rogers, 1972, p. 22).

Due to the topography of the site, the park was divided into two parts. The Upper Park contained sweeping views, where formal architectural effects were avoided unless done on a large scale. While the Lower Park had more interrupted views leading to a greater variety of effects (Olmsted & Vaux, 1972, p. 64). Despite the plan discussing the parts of the park in isolation, Olmsted viewed the park as a single work of art (Rogers, 1972, p. 22). Olmsted was opposed to monumental entrances and archways but made concessions to Beaux Arts ideas and architects such as Richard Morris Hunt where he felt it was appropriate (Rogers, 1972, p. 8).

Olmsted's Central Park was a bold democratic experiment. All classes were invited to socialise in the same rural setting. As the park prospered during the 19th century with its well maintained pleasurable surroundings, many agree that it succeeded in its mission (Rogers, 1987, p. 12), while others argue that the social reform stemming from the parks construction did not occur (Taylor, 1999). Ultimately, Olmsted's approach to harmonising the city with artistic mega-parks was superseded by the City Beautiful movement (Rogers, 1972, p. 8).

Olmsted's used his deep understanding of natural processes to transform his landscapes. However, his understanding of social and political processes, was not as strong, which has led to his design intent being compromised (Spirn, 1995, p. 111). The uses of the park have also changed over the years. Baseball fields and tennis courts were added around 1900, roads were surfaced to cater for cars, and in the 1930's the central reservoir was developed into the Great Lawn (Wade, 1998, p. 42). Changes in pedestrian circulation patterns resulted in desire lines where paths do not follow the most direct route to the pedestrians destination (Rogers, 1987, pp. 34-35). Yet changes in use are not only to blame for the decline in the park

The biggest threat to Central Park to date has been that of encroachment. Under the 26 year rein of Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, many buildings, facilities and playgrounds were constructed. While these may have had their followers, they were implemented without consideration of the original intent or design of the park (Rogers, 1987, pp. 13-14). Guggenheimer (1969) expressed dissatisfaction at what had become of the park: "... that in place of the constant updating, improvements and additional beautification of parks, we have substituted deterioration, encroachment, and the installation of facilities that are out of character with a park setting" (p. 142). However, encroachment and the subsequent decline of the park, ultimately lead to its preservation.

Residents of New York are now fiercely protective of Central Park. In a sense, Olmsted was too clever in disguising the artifice of his landscapes, which are now viewed by many as natural rather than human created. This had lead to a reluctance to update the landscape, which is arguably not what Olmsted would have wanted (Guggenheimer, 1969, p. 142; Spirn, 1995, pp. 91-111). Concern for the park is so extreme, that it took the artist Christo and his partner Jeanne-Claude 26 year to realise their dream of completing an art installation in Central Park. Only after they gave assurances that every stick and leaf would be left the way they found it was the project allowed to proceed (Webb, 2005, p. 27-28).

Few of the original structures in Central Park have survived its 150 years, but the landscape is largely still intact. The overall design intent, that the park visitor is surrounded by trees and cannot see the extent of the park from any position is still present (Wade, 1998, p. 42). Since the construction of Central Park, and Omsted's other major project, Prospect Park, there have been few large parks designed as works of art. It is unlikely, that any similar parks will be constructed in future due to the shear cost involved, despite the increase in societal wealth

There is no doubt that Olmsted and Vaux produced one of the most artistic and aesthetically pleasing public parks in the world. Central Park is an icon and a source of pride for residents of New York City. Despite encroachment, periods of neglect, changes of use and deviation from Olmsted's vision the landscape has endured and is still a fine example of what a public park should be. While the social reforms that the park was supposed to inspire appeared, it is questionable how successful they were. Plans for social reform through large public parks like Central Park were quickly superseded by the City Beautiful movement, suggesting that a park in isolation, is not enough of a catalyst for long lasting social reform.

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Le Corbusier and the Modernist Experiment

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Le Corbusier was without doubt one of the most influential people of the 20th century in the fields of architecture and urban planning. As a founder of the modernist movement, his work, which was not without controversy, inspired a generation of planners and architects after World War II. While his plans have fallen out of favour in recent times, the context for the development is worthy of investigation. Also worth discussion is the effect that the implementation of these plans has had. Overwhelmingly, the most important (and the most misunderstood) aspect of Le Corbusier's work is the social order that he was trying to create.

Le Corbusier

Charles-Edouard Jeanneret was born on October 6, 1887 to a family of well known watch makers in the Swiss town of La Chaux-de-Fonds (Hall 2002: 219). He gained early acclaim as a painter and as an architecture critic. Jeanneret recreated himself as Le Corbusier, which roughly translated is "the crow-like one". Le Corbusier rose to become the Parisian leader of the Modern Architecture revolution and a founding member of Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) (Fishman 2003: 24-5). He was perhaps most famed for the statement that the "house is a machine to live in" and the industrial methods he promoted to create such a house (Hall 2002: 220).

Influences

Le Corbusier's influences are wide and varied. The fact that he was born in Switzerland and didn't move to Paris permanently until he was 31 probably had a lot to do with his obsession of order and uniformity, especially in regards to cities (Hall 2002: 219). He was impressed with Parker and Unwin's interpretation of the Garden City and the way they were trying to

create an “architectural appropriateness for cooperative civilization” (Fishman 1982: 180). Growing up, he saw how the industrial age caused the countryside to stagnate, while the cities suffered chaotic growth. Living conditions for the working class were miserable (Fishman 2003: 26). However, despite his dislike of industrial age cities, he saw some advantages of the era.

Le Corbusier was fascinated with technology. He was introduced to technological rationalism by engineer August Penret (Fishman 1982:170). Specifically, he was interested in how this new technology could be used in housing and to create utopia. New methods of production had been brought about by the businessmen and engineers. In Le Corbusier’s view, it was up to architects to make use of them (Fishman 1982: 187), yet he only acknowledged the advantages of technology where it fit his social values (Fishman 2003: 27).

Le Corbusier’s views were considered idealistic. He was not interested in extracting more profit out of land. In fact, property rights often frustrated him. However, there was little enthusiasm for his theories from socialists who believed that urban design would always reflect the inequality of capitalist society (Fishman 2003: 27). In the 1920s, Le Corbusier visited the Soviet Union where ideas similar to his were appearing. He rejected the Soviets as too authoritarian well before they rejected modernism (Hall 2002: 226), though modernism eventually returned east of the Iron Curtain with the ascendancy of Khrushchev (Kunstler 2001: 132).

Plans

Le Corbusier’s first contribution to the modern industrial civilization was the Domino house of 1914. He felt that WWI would finish shortly and a massive reconstruction effort would be required. The Domino house was mass produced and based on a standard concrete form (Fishman 1982: 178). While the Domino house imposed a uniformity that Le Corbusier felt was missing from the industrial city, the overall effect could be varied, through position and placement of the houses, by the planner (Fishman 1982: 178). Subsequent plans produced by Le Corbusier were much more ambitious.

The Contemporary City

A Contemporary City of Three Million Inhabitants was Le Corbusier’s first complete plan for an ideal city. It was meant to be a city of the time, rather than a relic of the past and was to usher in an era of order and social collectivism. The contemporary city was designed around function, efficiency and the realm of production. To provide efficiency, the city was segregated based on class (Fishman 1982: 191).

The social elite were to live at the centre of the city. The top 400,000 – 600,000 people were housed in 24 identical 60 storey glass and steel skyscrapers. What was unique about this plan was that the skyscrapers only occupied 15% of the land on the site with the remaining 85% left open for parks and gardens (Hall 2002: 224). Le Corbusier regarded the skyscraper as a vertical street, providing density without the “soulessness” of the industrial city. The elite housing was designed to be collectively serviced. Cooking, cleaning and shopping were no longer jobs that need to be performed by the elite (Fishman 2003: 26).

In the Contemporary City, the working class did not fair as well. They were relegated to satellite cities away from the central core, living in dwellings much more modest than those of their elite counterparts. The housing was based around low rise apartments built around courtyards with 45% of the site left as open space. What was common between the working

class and elite housing is that both were mass produced for mass living. Even the same furniture was to be used in every apartment (Hall 2002: 224).

Plan Voisin

Without doubt, Le Corbusier's most controversial plan was the Plan Voisin of 1925. The plan consisted of 18 uniform skyscrapers to be built in Paris, north of the Seine. To accomplish the plan, mass demolition of the historic area was required. Le Corbusier viewed the plan as the logical continuation of the work of Baron Hausmann, that would bring Paris into the age of the skyscraper and the automobile (Fishman 1982: 210). However, his plan was largely met with criticism and outrage. (Hall 2002: 222)

Le Corbusier claimed that the Plan Voisin would be hugely profitable. This was despite the massive cost of land resumptions. Even though most of the ground was to be covered by parks and gardens, there was to be five times as much office space as in the old business district. He attempted to form a private consortium of bankers and social elite to buy up the land needed and construct the 18 skyscrapers. While Le Corbusier's other plans gained a level of respect over the years, the Plan Voisin remained undesirable (Fishman 1982: 207-212).

While Le Corbusier's other plans gained a level of respect over the years, the Plan Voisin remained undesirable. This plan was attacked because of its inhuman scale, vast empty spaces and its elimination of close knit old streets with their rich and varied public life. Le Corbusier was also never able to prove the plan economically viable. (Fishman 1982: 207)

The Radiant City

Le Corbusier began to become disillusioned with the bourgeois elite and capitalism. This was for two reasons. Firstly, he experienced much frustration at property rights and that landlords' greed was preventing the city from operating efficiently (Fishman 1982: 217-218). Secondly, the 1929 stock market crash was proof to Le Corbusier that capitalism was too chaotic to create the order needed in the machine age. He felt that the existing power structures had failed the modern era (Fishman 1982: 220). Others argue this disillusionment arose because the bourgeois were no longer able to support his work (Hall 2002: 225). Regardless, the enthusiasm for capitalism and the separation of classes found in the Contemporary City was lost in his latest plan.

The Radiant City varies to the Contemporary City in that the residential district does not mirror the realm of production like the contemporary city. At the centre of the plan was high rise apartment blocks, Les Unité, catering for 2700 residents each. Unlike in the contemporary city, all classes lived together in the same area. Apartment size was to be based on need rather than wealth. Le Corbusier wanted to get rid of the space wasting dwellings that the elite used as status symbols (Fishman 2003: 55).

Les Unité was designed to have shared facilities so that all residents could have a level of amenity that would not otherwise be possible. Workshops for producing handicraft and common meeting rooms were provided for those activities that were no longer appropriate in the industrialised workplace. Cafés, restaurants, shops, gymnasiums, tennis courts and swimming pools were an integral part of each tower. As with the Contemporary City, the tower itself was designed to only take up 15% of the land (Fishman 2003: 55).

The Radiant City was more of a social than a planning or architectural revolution. In the radiant city, both men and women work. Cooking, cleaning and child raising are roles that are

collectively provided by society. The main focus of Les Unité is not so much the individual apartments but the collectively provided services which are designed to be a reward for eight hours of productive work in a factory or office (Fishman 2003, p. 56). An important fact, often omitted when discussing Le Corbusier's work, is that he was very clear to note that Les Unité was only of use after society itself had been revolutionised. He therefore never concerned himself with muggings in the park or vandalism of communal buildings as crime didn't exist in the Radiant City (Fishman 1982: 232).

European reconstruction

Modern architecture and urban theory played a large role in post World War II reconstruction in Europe. Berlin fared much worse than other cities with between one-third and half the city destroyed. In 1957, a residential district near the centre of West Berlin, the Hansa Quarter, that had been raised by the war was rebuilt along modernist lines. The development here differed from Le Corbusier's plans in that different architects were used to design different buildings, leading to variation in building styles (Ladd 2005). The following year, Le Corbusier set his sights on a larger project.

According to Le Corbusier, the war presented a unique opportunity for reform. Much of the opposition to his Plan Voisin was that vast tracts of land needed to be cleared before the plan could be implemented. Post-war Berlin, with its vast destruction, presented the clean slate he had been looking for. Le Corbusier created his Hauptstadt Berlin plan along the lines his Plan Voisin for a design competition for a reunified Berlin (Kunstler 2001: 131-132). Le Corbusier did not win the competition and, in any case, the plan did not go ahead due to the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. By this time, the Soviets were producing their own brand of modernism in East Berlin. However, unlike that of the West, the Soviet buildings completely lacked any form of ornament (Ladd 2005).

Britain embraced modernism for other reasons in addition to reconstruction. In 1955, the British launched a major slum clearance program. This, combined with a far greater than expected population growth, led the government to promote large, high-rise apartment complexes. By the mid 1960s, 20% of the public housing stock were units in five story or taller blocks, from virtually none before the war. High rise public housing projects in Britain have been plagued with crime and other social problems. These problems are partly related to class of the occupant as not all Modernist projects have suffered from social problems (Hall 2002: 241).

Le Corbusier's first Les Unité in Marseilles is different to the imitations. Partly because it is occupied by middle class residents, but also because they are proud to live in one of France's greatest architectural monuments. It is nothing like the poorly serviced public housing featured in Britain. The rich always fared better living at high densities than the poor because they could afford the services such as maintenance staff and doormen which make high rise apartments more liveable (Hall 2002: 247). Children were also not well accommodated in these high density developments. According to Jacobs (1961), the fact that these developments were based in parks rather than regular streets, led children to commit anti-social behaviour because their parents did not have their watchful eyes on them.

Brasilia: a new social order

The only new city constructed in the Corbusian image, other than Chandigarh, was Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. While Brasilia was not planned by Le Corbusier, it was based on the principals of CIAM which was the most influential forum for the promotion of modern architecture (Holston 1989: 31). Both A Contemporary City and The Radiant City, Le

Corbusier's most complete works, were the prototypes for ideal cities in CIAM's Athens Charter, their most definitive publication on city building (Holston, 1989, p32).

A number of comparisons can be drawn between the work of Le Corbusier and Brasilia. Both feature: dwelling units of uniform height, scale and appearance divided into residential superblocks; gardens and other collective facilities; freeways crossing the city on both axis; administration, business and financial towers built around the centre of the freeway crossings; and the recreation zone surrounding the city (Holston, 1989, p32).

Brasilia was intended to transform society. It was thought that the city plan could create a social order in its image (Holston, 1989, p4). However, Brasilia failed to create a classless society. Servants in the residential high rises fared worse than they would have in traditional workers quarters. Due to the layout of the city, the classes were segregated to a much greater extent than in old cities (Hall 2002 p233-4). Brasilia also has a very limited street life. Casual interaction between citizens does not occur because the pedestrian has been replaced with the private car (Holston, 1989 p 103- 119).

Criticism

Much of the criticism surrounding Le Corbusier's is the lack of appropriateness. Chandigarh in India was the only new modernist city that Le Corbusier worked on. While he was not the head planner, he completely took charge of the project. The result was a class segregated city and an urban form with no regard for the Indian climate or culture (Hall 2002: 227). Others claim that the only reason people moved into modernist developments is because they were forced out of their existing neighbourhoods. This was due to landlords not maintaining the traditional properties while governments and banks only provided finance for either the suburban expansion or mega-projects like the 15,300 apartment Co-op city in Bronx, New York (Gratz 1989: 94).

One of the most spectacular failures of the modernist movement was the Pruitt-Igoe project in St Louis which was constructed in the late 1950s. The site of the project consisted of 22 identical 11 story apartment blocks. While the project was designed to be a mixed class environment, it was generally occupied only by single parent families and those dependant on social security. Residents never felt attached to the common facilities in these development as they were detached from their apartments. With no one else to maintain the facilities, decay set in (Newman 1996: 10). In 1972, just 13 years after its completion, the project was demolished due to the state of disrepair, high vacancy rates and many social problems (Hall 2002, p 256).

Central to much of Le Corbusier's, and that of his contemporaries work, is the removal of streets and their replacements with parks and freeways. Le Corbusier detested the streets of the old city (Kunstler 2001). However, city life begins and ends on the street. Many large modernist urban renewal projects have completely ignored the role of the street and their role in maintaining community (Gratz 1989: 293-5). Much of Jacobs (1961) work was dedicated to the importance of city streets. Mumford (1961: 519) went further claiming Le Corbusier wasn't even building a city:

What Le Corbusier put forward as an improvement, the so-called Vertical Garden City, is in fact only a vertical suburb, whose very alternation of isolated high-rise buildings with uncultivated open areas makes the word city meretricious.

Since the 1960s, there has been growing discontent with modernist cities. Some have dubbed the whole postwar reconstruction effort the "second deconstruction" of the city because many

of the large scale projects required the raising of buildings and neighbourhoods that had survived the war. In recent times, much effort has been expended on correcting the perceived wrongs of the modernist era. (Ladd 2005).

Conclusion

It is clear that Le Corbusier has had an enormous impact on cities around the world. While he wasn't directly responsible for the construction of many projects, his modernist contemporaries were. Modernist projects based on sections of his plans have been replicated over and over again, all around the world. While these projects may have been unneeded in North America, there is no doubt that they were part of the solution to the housing shortage after WWII in Europe. Much of the criticism of his work stems from the social problems surrounding the modernist projects he influenced. However, Le Corbusier was obviously planning on a form of social revolution before utopia could be found in his plans.

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