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Cultured Wilderness and Wild Culture:

The Olmsted Legacy in Rochester and Graffiti in the Grove

BY CHARLES BURROUGHS

At least on the map, the Genesee River dominates the city and region of Rochester, New York, as it cuts northward to bisect downtown before entering a deep gorge and joining its waters to Lake Ontario (see Figure 1). On the ground, certainly, the river is less evident and, in much of the city, it is the cluster of antennas on Pinnacle Hill that catch the eye. The antennas draw attention to an ancient "hummocky ridge," formed by glacial deposits, that runs roughly perpendicular to the river, just to the south of downtown (Grasso 1993, 112). The more prominent section of the ridge extends to the west of the river and is known locally as the Pinnacle Range; it has played a key role in the lives of Rochesterians for a century and a half. Where the Range meets the river on the

Water tank in Washington Grove: Nature meets culture, but not as usually understood. *All photos by Charles Burroughs.*

Fig. 1. Map of Rochester Park System. Geneseo Valley Park is to the far south, below the University and Cemetery, and Seneca Park hugs the valley to the north. Cobb's Hill is to the east, at the edge of the city. Courtesy City of Rochester, Department of Community Development. A Survey of Rochester's Historic Parklands, prepared by Bayer Landscape Architecture. Rochester, NY, 2009.

western side, the glaciated, picturesque terrain is taken up by Mount Hope Cemetery, one of the great Victorian commemorative landscapes dedicated to the memory of the affluent and important (including Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass), and filled with solemn marble monuments among mighty trees (Reisem and Gillespie 1994; Chaisson 2004). Also adjoining the river is the campus of the University of Rochester, established in 1930 on the site (formerly "Oak Hill") of a section of the Pinnacle Range that had been previously removed to accommodate the fairways and bunkers of a golf course.

On the ridge, to the east of the cemetery, the noted landscape architect and urban planner Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., laid out Highland Park, part of one of four park systems that he designed and implemented in the US (the others are in Boston, Buffalo, and Louisville) (Comeau 2013).[1] Olmsted took the Highland Park commission with reluctance; the park was founded as an arboretum for the display of a collection of exotic—as well as native—trees and shrubs donated by the nursery firm of Ellwanger and Barry, then perhaps the most prominent nursery in the nation and which was located nearby. Throughout his career Olmsted's preference was for an appearance of natural landscape, including meadows, glades, and water features that gave harassed urbanites respite from the noise, stress, and pollution of their daily lives. Certainly, Olmsted used exotic plants in his landscapes, but he consistently opposed fussy but popular garden features, like the flowerbeds that have subsequently intruded into many of his parks (Beveridge and Rocheleau 1998; Spirn 1996). During his career, indeed, Olmsted especially admired and fought to preserve large-scale "wild" landscapes, notably Yosemite and Niagara Falls, where he allied a democratic concern with public access to the concealment, wherever possible, of human presence (Beveridge and Rocheleau 1998, 166–177).[2]

Olmsted is, of course, best known for an almost entirely artificial landscape, New York's Central Park, where tree-fringed pastoral meadows alternate with formal elements (like the Mall), highly informal planting (like the Ramble), and lakes and water features, all constructed by human hand. Central Park was Olmsted's earliest park, and it remains his most famous achievement as a park planner, perhaps in part because of his increasing interest in park systems, with diverse elements connected by parkways or other links, rather than stand-alone parks. This ambitious expansion of the scope of landscape architecture to embrace urban planning produced impressive results, most famously in Boston and Buffalo,[3] but all Olmsted's park systems suffered from later changes in transportation, economic, and demographic conditions; ideas about the functions of parks; and sheer neglect. Of course, the current fame of Central Park is a corollary of the relatively recent recovery of New York and the availability of resources for park restoration and urban development that are simply not available in Buffalo, say, or Rochester.

The parks that Olmsted designed for Rochester are markedly diverse in character.

Fig. 2. Aerial view of Cobbs Hill Park and Washington Grove. The two Water Authority tanks are located to the northwest of the reservoir. Between the tanks and the reservoir, the meadow and curving fringe of pines are visible. Imagery ©2015 Digital Globe New York GIS USDA Farm Service Agency Map Data, © 2015 Google.

As we noted, Highland Park is an arboretum, with contrasted ornamental plantings and an encyclopedic ambition. More typical of Olmsted's approach is Genesee Valley Park, south of the urban core, which resembles Central Park in its markedly pastoral character and the presence of water, although here, in contrast to Central Park, the water feature is a preexisting river, which Olmsted left as it was. The Genesee River flows north from the park past the University of Rochester and Mount Hope Cemetery into downtown, which in Olmsted's day was densely packed with commercial and industrial buildings, extending even across one of the bridges over the Genesee. At that time another bridge served as a viaduct to carry the Erie Canal, which traversed downtown, across the river. By 1918, the route of the Canal through downtown had been abandoned; the new route of the Canal, now renamed the New York State Barge Canal, took it directly through Genesee Valley Park.[4] The park's integrity was even more seriously compromised in the 1950s by the intrusion of a major highway, an emblem of the irresistible triumph, as it seemed, of the automobile that affected Rochester as negatively as most US cities at the time.

The river flows gently through Genesee Valley Park. It is a far more dramatic component of Olmsted's other major park in Rochester, which encloses the deep gorge of the Genesee in the northernmost reaches of the city. Olmsted responded with enthusiasm to the geographical conditions he encountered along the Genesee; as he wrote to Edward Mott Moore, the eminent physician and leading proponent of the Rochester park program, "I don't know of another city in the country favored with such an opportunity" (Olmsted 2013, 541). Indeed in Olmsted's North, later Seneca Park (now divided into Seneca and Maplewood Parks), the calm and tranquility of the southern park gives way to a spectacle of cliff and forest, and water crashing over falls, where in Olmsted's day were located the water-powered mills and factories, perhaps contributing to the picturesque, or perhaps rather sublime, effect (a power station survives close to the Lower Falls; the factory district, known as McCrackenville, once located between the Lower and Middle Falls, has now disappeared) (Beveridge and Rocheleau 1998).[5]

Olmsted had only a few years to devote to Rochester, among his countless other projects. His failing mental and physical health forced his retirement in 1895; he died in 1903. He thus played no part in the involvement of his firm, led by his two sons, in the creation in 1908 of a further Rochester park at the eastern end of the Pinnacle Range, where quarrying and road construction had begun to eat away the natural ridge. The new park, known as Cobb's Hill (see

Figure 2), owed its existence primarily not to any concern to provide recreational amenities for the citizens, but rather for the need to supply the growing city with water (Comeau 2013; McKelvey 1949). The top of the hill was excavated to create a reservoir, with elegant neo-classical pumping stations and ancillary buildings and promenades providing views over the southern section of the city, stretching to downtown in the distance. Olmsted's younger son, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the chief planner, had developed a close connection with Rochester, which he knew well by 1911, when the city issued a very detailed, statistics-based urban plan that he had prepared. In the following decade, at the other end of the Pinnacle Range, the new campus of the University of Rochester took shape, to Olmsted's designs (May 1977). In general, the independent status of Fredrick Law Olmsted, Jr., as a planning expert, as well as landscape architect, is increasingly receiving recognition (Klaus 2002); notably, he took his father's place on the Macmillan Commission, established in 1901 with the charge of creating a monumental district in Washington, DC, worthy of a newly imperial nation (Gutheim and Lee 2006; Foglesong 2014).

At Cobb's Hill, in or around 1908, the Olmsted firm planted a pinetum of spruce and other evergreens on the eastern side, and on the west, a fringe of Austrian pine along the curving drive around the reservoir. These ornamental plantings largely survive; they are composed of exotic species, or at least species that were never part of the local forest but surely deserve preservation, where possible, or restoration as much as any important building of the time.

Beyond the pines, the ground slopes down, forming a meadow that must have been part of the design of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., although he surely did not anticipate the closely spaced grove of Norway maples now occupying the area. The meadow adjoins a forested area belonging to the local Water Authority that, in turn, merges into Washington Grove, which was officially incorporated into the park in 1912, and which has subsequently become a much loved amenity for generations of citizens.

Though the Olmsted firm's design for the park preceded this acquisition by four years, the partners surely took into account the extensive grove of old growth forest—in their day still dominated by huge chestnut trees—that adjoined the area acquired by the city. Indeed in 1909, Frederick, Jr., went on record advocating the transformation

Austrian pine and view across Cobb's Hill Reservoir to the Pinetum. This pine is part of a fringe of similar trees separating the circular drive from the meadow and the Grove.

Washington Grove. Trees growing on the edge of one of the glacial kettles in the Grove.

of the entire Pinnacle range into a park; his views appeared first in the inaugural issue of a weekly broadsheet *The Pinnacle*, but were soon reported in the main local newspaper.[6]

Today's Washington Grove is a world of towering trees and intricate terrain, through which paths meander and where the prevailing silence is broken by the sounds of birds and skittering chipmunks.[7] To many observers it is a natural cathedral, lifting the spirit to higher things, according to an attitude deeply rooted in American culture, at least since Henry David Thoreau retreated to his cabin at Walden Pond. But the appearance is deceptive; like urban forests throughout the eastern US, the Grove has suffered serious degradation, in part through past neglect, but especially through inappropriate use and the suffocating effect of a range of invasive species, such as Norway maple and autumn olive. Fortunately, the Grove has found its champions; since 2008, a dedicated group of volunteers, in collaboration with the city authorities, has freed much of the Grove from invaders, and there are now many signs of recovery (Debes 2014).

The removal of unwanted species, however important, is not enough to secure the regeneration of the woodland. The star species of the Grove are its ancient oaks, but because of a weevil infestation the black and white oaks, in particular, are not regenerating, so that human intervention is needed to replace the fallen giants. Thanks to a survey of plant communities in the Grove made in the 1920s, the successive impoverishment of the woodland in terms of biological diversity is only too clear, and the work has begun of reintroducing lost species, especially in the understory. Passive preservation, in short, has given way to a more activist conservationist stance, resonating, largely unconsciously, with a redefinition of "wilderness," articulated notably by environmental theorists and historians William Cronon and Anne Whiston Spirn, as existing less in the "real world" than in the mind of nature lovers and users. In other words, apparently "wild" nature is in fact profoundly shaped by human intervention and interpretation; the more "wild" a forest or other biome seems to be, the more cultivated it may actually be (Cronon 1996; Spirn 1996; Solomon 2014; Pollan 1991).[8]

Through the lush foliage and the shafts of massive trees, a walker in the Grove, approaching the high ground toward the woodland edge, may glimpse a flash of color in sharp contrast with the surrounding subdued browns and greens. On top of the rise stand water tanks, long in disuse, surrounded by trees and thick undergrowth.

The water tanks have been discovered by graffiti artists, who have covered accessible surfaces with paintings, many of high quality, especially in the interior of one of the tanks, reached through a small opening in the side. The paintings are highly diverse in style, scale, and subject matter, and it is obvious that many hands have been at work. The contrast, for example, with the ordered and decorous landscape of remembrance and mourning of Mount Hope Cemetery, further along the Pinnacle Range, is striking indeed. The imagery suggests that the painters and likely audience of the graffiti not only belong to a younger generation than the Friends, but also are far more ethnically and culturally diverse. As yet, I know the identity of only one of the artists, the Afro-Brazilian painter Eder Muniz, from Salvador, Brazil,

who has built a considerable reputation in New York, as well as in his native country (Jones 2013).[9] The anonymity of the artists and taggers is not surprising; in Rochester, as elsewhere, graffiti art is almost by definition a secretive or even "underground" activity, and graffiti artists traditionally seek out illicit or at least unauthorized sites for their imagery.[10]

None of the artwork on the tanks has much expectation of longevity. New paintings obscure earlier ones, giving the impression of the tanks as an arena of impassioned competition, where rival artists cancel out each other's work. The tanks are less like a staid art gallery than a visual equivalent of a "slam," where rappers or even poets try to outdo each other. Or perhaps the arrangement and succession of paintings also evoke very ancient practices. Typically, graffiti artists break with the traditional conception of a painting as bordered by a (usually) rectangular frame, which separates a surface carrying imagery not only from the "real world" but also from other framed surfaces, whether painted by the same or other artists. Overlapping imagery is a feature of the Paleolithic cave paintings at Lascaux and similar sites, or of the pictograms of indigenous peoples, for whom the western concept of the "frame" or the convention of framing is entirely unknown (Kittredge 2010). Of course, the nature of the audience of the Lascaux paintings cannot be known, though it is reasonable to presume the absence of more or less professional critics in the modern sense. At the tanks, also, even the most elaborate graffiti seem to be done for an immediate audience, namely the painter and any companions, rather than for a lasting effect, for the reasons I have noted. Everything suggests that, at the tanks, it is the performance rather than the product that matters.

The upshot is a remarkable paradox. In its range of species and through the absence of overt signs of human intervention, the Grove appears to be authentic old-growth woodland. In fact, however, it is carefully tended, if not increasingly "constructed" by volunteers whose activity is carefully organized and circumscribed. To an extent this is an open-air museum, illustrating a certain historic biome, which can no longer

Anonymous artists, The Great Owl and assorted graffiti on water tank, Cobb's Hill.

Eder Muniz's Fantastic Head, graffiti on water tank, Cobb's Hill.

exist unaided. At the tanks, however, there is no discernible orderliness in the arrangement or succession of imagery produced, apparently, by individuals perhaps more or less motivated by an anarchic attitude or even ideology. Indeed, in the imagery itself, there is nothing to suggest that the graffiti artists see—or wish to represent—themselves as constituting a community of some kind, for all the evidence of shared cultural values and creative impulses. At the tanks, then, a cultivated wilderness confronts a competitive culture of unregulated and, in a word, "wild" attitudes. If we can think of nature as an unregulated process guided by no conscious planning, therefore, we can understand the Grove as a place where art and nature have changed places, and where an artful nature surrounds and conceals a "natural" assemblage of art.

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Notes

[1] Comeau's article, "125 Years of Rochester's Parks" (2013), celebrating the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the park system, is the only monographic treatment. Probably the leading Olmsted expert is Charles Beveridge, but Rochester merits just two pages in Charles E. Beveridge and Paul Rocheleau's *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape* (Beveridge and Rocheleau 1998, 94–95). See also Birnbaum and Comeau (2009).

[2] For a now classic critique of a naïve notion of "wilderness," see Cronon (1995) and also, more recently, Solomon (2014).

[3] For an exceptional recent account of an Olmsted integrated urban project, see Kowsky (2013).

[4] This was part of a "major overhaul of the canal system" Robb (2014); see also Mannion (2008).

[5] Beveridge (1998) distinguishes Olmsted's pastoral and picturesque styles. As I will argue elsewhere, here a third, "sublime" approach was operative.

[6] *Democrat and Chronicle*, Rochester, August 31, 1909. I thank Larry Champoux for the reference.

[7] For expert opinion on the biology and geology of the Grove, I am grateful to Peter Debes and Edward J. Olinger of the Friends of Washington Grove.

[8] I thank Evelyn Brister for the Pollan (1991) citation and for general inspiration.

[9] I am grateful to Peter Debes for information about Muniz.

[10] For an authoritative history of graffiti art, from the street or subway car to the gallery, see Gastman and Neelon (2010).

A recent full-time resident of Rochester, NY, Charles Burroughs retired in 2014 from the Smith Chair of Humanities at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, where he was Professor of Classics and Art History. Earlier, he spent two decades at Binghamton University, State University of New York (SUNY), and he is currently adjunct Professor of Art History at SUNY Geneseo. Educated in the UK (Oxford and London Universities), he is an art and architectural historian best known for his work on Italian late medieval and Renaissance built environments and designed landscapes. He is also active in historic preservation and landscape restoration, and he is an enthusiastic gardener. Photo courtesy of the author.

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