



Civilizing American Cities: A Selection of Frederick Law Olmsted's Writings on City Landscape (MIT Press)

Frederick Law Olmsted

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A century ago Frederick Law Olmsted recognized the need for extensive planning if American cities were to become civilized environments for man. The selections in this book demonstrate his understanding of urban spaces and how, when politically unobstructed, he was able to manipulate them. While Sutton has concentrated on Olmsted's contributions to the theory and practice of city planning, her anthology reveals a broad and comprehensive cross section of his career. Writings in the first two chapters elucidate the views and values that Olmsted brought to his work--notably his attitudes on form and function (fitness and appropriateness)-- and his criticisms of existing urban patterns. At a time when men generally took a static approach to planning, Olmsted opposed the traditional grid system, lack of organic structure, and abuse of space which dominated schemes for American cities. Instead he proposed that large spaces be set aside for public parks, connected by roadways and public transportation to the rest of the city. The books remaining chapters contain documents written in support of specific plans for five North American cities with widely varying conditions: San Francisco, Buffalo, Montreal, Chicago, and Boston. The writings range in scope from Olmsted's observations on nineteenth century California life to his most elaborate and ambitious design of a system of parks and boulevards for Boston. Two selections describing plans for the exurban Garden Cities of Berkeley, California, and Riverside, Illinois, complete anthology. At the end of his career, Olmsted could look on 17 large public parks as well as numerous smaller works and comment: "I know that in the minds of a large body of men of influence I have raised my calling from the rank of a trade, even of a handicraft, to that of a liberal profession, an art, an art of design."

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