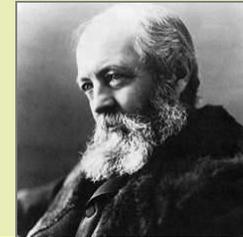




Suburban Sprawl's Stranglehold

A Case for Places



Volume 4 Lake County Edition

"To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

-Frederick Law Olmsted

Frederick Law Olmsted

(1822-1903) is most recognized as the founder of American landscape architecture and the nation's foremost park designer. The legacy of his philosophy and influence are evidenced to present day. Early on, Olmsted came to appreciate the natural scenery of the countryside and gained a deeper wisdom of its value. Olmsted's basis for his design principles were influenced by the late nineteenth century writings and sketches of Humphry Repton, Uvedale Price, William Gilpin and other English landscape gardeners, and theorists of the art of landscape design. Olmsted's theoretical aesthetic appreciation for picturesque beauty was rooted in the perception of nature's profound affect of unconscious influence on the mind.

He believed in the use of landscape as an art form that could fill the need to restore the human spirit. A process in itself that could be best accomplished through a subconscious effort.

Three basic principles that met his design criteria were the "effective organization of space" in creating scenes that sought to play with background and foreground elements known as "perspective effect." Secondly, Olmsted indulged in the concept of the "pastoral style" and the "picturesque style" in his landscape designs with the intention of forming a direct link to the viewer's subconscious. Thirdly, Olmsted introduced complexity and obscurity (mechanisms of light and shadow) while also layering foliage in expressing the quality, beauty, and lush bounty of nature.



The Ramble

Overlooking "the ramble" from the Park Belvedere the first impression one might observe is the notion that the scenery had already existed there for ages. In fact it was designed to look and behave that way, the "wild" picturesque scenic beauty conjured up in the mind and brilliantly executed to the wonder of all who gaze upon it since the park opened to the public. In Olmsted's eyes, nature was true work of art to behold and enjoy. Visit www.olmsted.org.

Riverside Park

NEW YORK CITY

So why am I rambling on about Frederick Law Olmsted? Why should he be relevant in today's modern world which has been mostly conjured up and developed around conventional [vehicles and highways]. Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux make me think about my own places growing up on the upper west side of Manhattan—Riverside Park. This *place*, makes me think of the importance of how public parks and places serve a role in our dense urban/suburban environments. Riverside park runs along the western edge of upper Manhattan from 72nd street to 125th street. A narrow strip overlooking the Hudson River. A place for neighborhood mothers to bring their children to play in the sandboxes and playgrounds. A place to walk, meet friends for a game, partake in family gatherings, bike ride, or simply relax and enjoy the scenery. Now I am not denying there aren't parks and public places in Florida. There are indeed, yet for some reason or another they do not have the same kind of appeal or attraction that brings the masses together unless of course there is a high school football game or soccer match.

Places should serve more than just those functions. I am predisposed to think we need more parks and places that are accessible to everyone, not just by car. These places should be inherently well designed, perhaps to even capture the *hearts and minds* of all those who partake of their natural settings just as Olmsted came to appreciate.

In recognizing the great works of landscape design and public spaces – our history should remind us that as planners, landscapes designers, civil engineers, and architects, we have an ongoing legacy to advance the work that has been so successful in the past and enhance our environment in creating places that future generations will also come to appreciate.

The Interface of Nature and the Brain.
"Your brain is drawing connections between place and memory, even if you don't realize it." - Jonas Salk on the subject of "biophilic" design."



Courtesy Google Earth

Riverside Park, New York City

The "upper level" that functions like a esplanade, runs along Riverside Drive in this part of the upper west side of Manhattan. The narrow strip accommodates many functions apart from being a picturesque scenic park and street.



Riverside Park, New York City

Below: Riverside Park situated on Manhattan's upper west side bordering the Hudson River and Riverside Drive.



Riverside Drive, New York, NY

The "intermediate level" (total of three) overlooks the lowest tier, the west side highway and the Hudson River. The hill and promenade and trails are places to enjoy all year long, whether sledding, biking, running, walking, or playing sports.



Public places such as these are a valuable testament to a society that seeks to improve or enhance the quality of life of its citizens for the benefit of the common good.

They become an extension of activities in our daily lives and perhaps part of our collective soul. In establishing human settlements we may separate nature from our man-made environments but we can not always sever human connection to nature. To go further, we know it is in our nature to behave predictably and as social beings we are inclined to gather in places. Whether it is the church, the mall, the gym, or the park.

Public places are and should forever remain part of the larger picture in the urban or suburban scheme; accessible to everyone by all means.



MONUMENTS

A PLACE FOR MOMUMENTS

Who is buried in Grant's Tomb? Find the answer in Riverside Park. Along there you will find more monuments such as the heroic tribute to Joan of Arc, the Fireman's Memorial, or the Soldier's and Sailors Monument.

Suburban Retrofitting: "The Park-Mart"

ANY PLACE, USA



The Art of Place Making

When it comes to creating great walkable, vibrant places, It's not *magic* as Walt Disney would have liked everyone to believe. People make a city. Its streets are the life blood. It's places enduring and ever changing.

Suburban landscapes are largely the same anywhere throughout the United States—dominated by “placeless” pattern of low density, automobile dependent, single uses spread out over large areas or as James Howard Kunstler described as “the geography of no-where” whereby “eighty percent of the American built environment in the last fifty years is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading.”

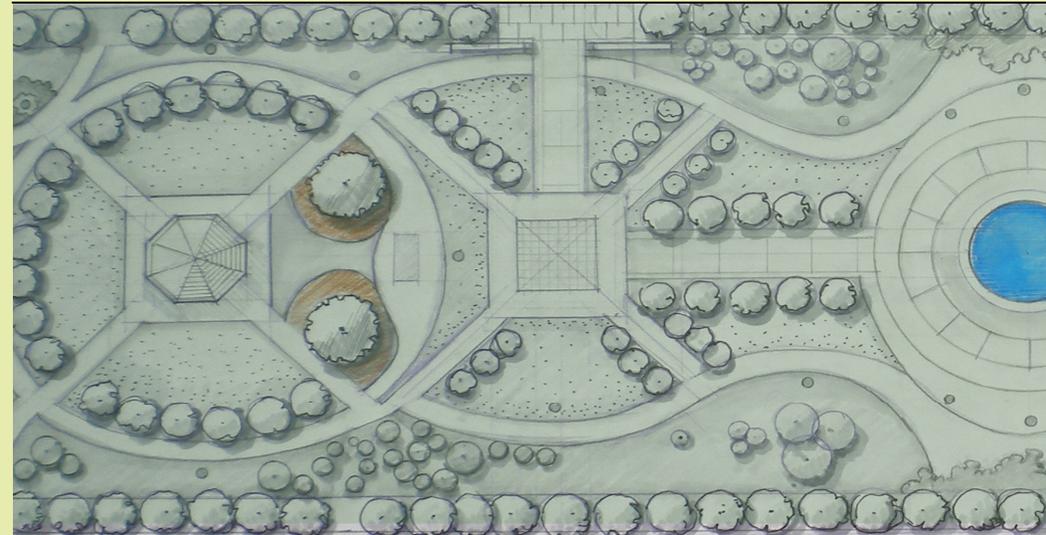
Characterized by wide streets, strip shopping centers, and “big box” retailers with vast surface parking lots.

In a vain effort to hide or mask these retail behemoths, local municipalities have created deep set backs from the streets and thoroughfares alluding to

the impression that they aren't there (*so it goes, if you can't see it, it doesn't exist*). Yet we all know the big box stores are here to stay and they're parking lots over designed to accommodate so many cars that will most likely never fill their lots.

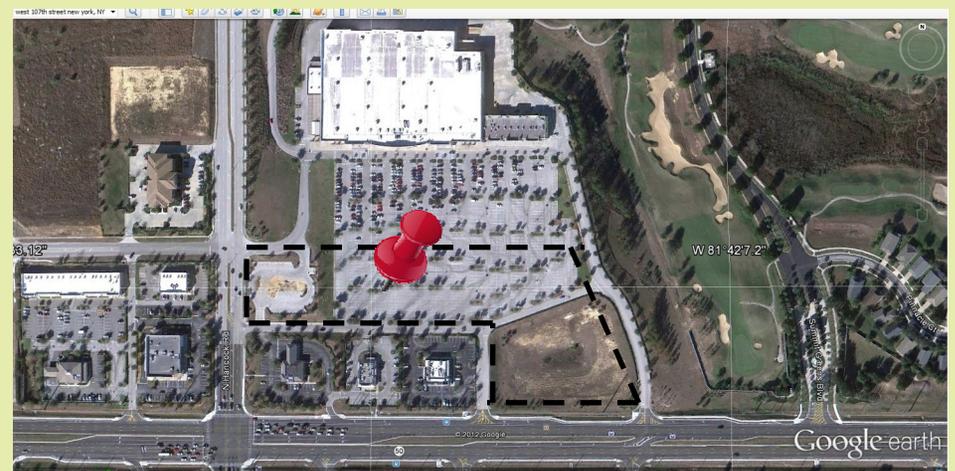
In some cases, overflow parking was conceived as a way to handle all the parking required on the biggest shopping day of the year—“black Friday.”

In theory, whatever the intent, this planning practice is based on a automobile dependency and virtually no accommodation for pedestrian, bicycle, or public transportation. Yet in practice, we can observe a different set of circumstances as a result of this methodology.



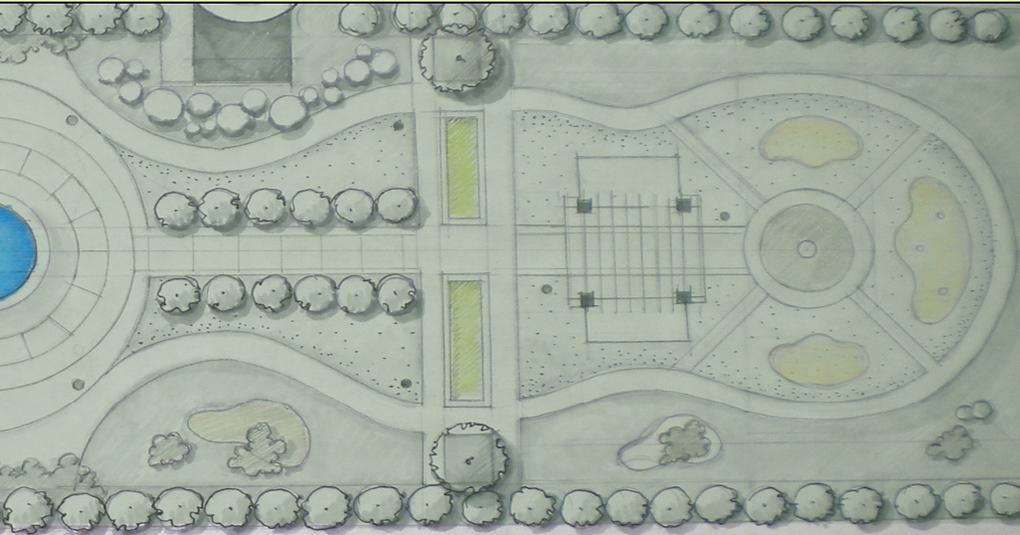
Target parking lot, Highway 50 Lake County

The target site shown below indicated the vast amount of pavement provided for parking that may never be used all year round, even on “black Friday's.” In most cases, zoning ordinances attempt to mask or hide the big box retailers and provide visible ample parking at the front by setting back the store hundreds of feet.



Sketch of proposed “pavement to parks”

Below: A pedestrian friendly suburban oasis adjacent to a large big box retailer allowing people a place to compliment their shopping experience.



Sketch of proposed Target Park

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A narrow strip of land can be reclaimed from vast surface parking for the sake of creating public spaces within the realm of “open space” and corporate domains—vast empty space and blank store front. Parks like these could incorporate habitats for wildlife and landscaping, sand boxes, paths for walking, jogging, benches, or gazebos.

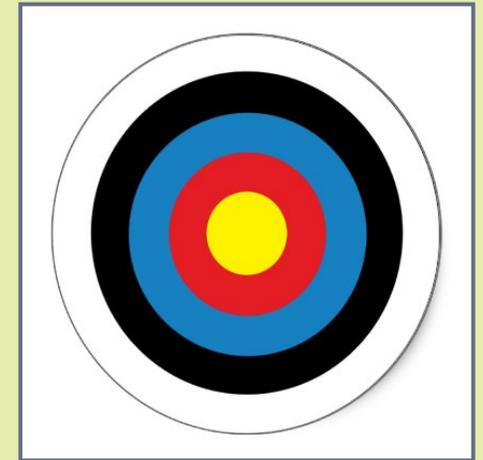


Artist's Illustration Copyright 2012 ©

Transforming a portion of “under-utilized” surface parking into a small park requires vision, and leadership from corporations, local governments, and the community.



Public places are a valuable testament to a society that seeks to improve or enhance the quality of life of its citizens for the benefit of the common good. They become an extension of activities in our daily lives and perhaps part of our collective soul. In establishing human settlements we may separate nature from our man-made environments but we can not always sever human connection to nature. To go further, we know it is in our nature to behave predictably and as social beings we are inclined to gather in places. Whether it is the church, the mall, the gym, or the park. Public places are and should forever remain part of the larger picture in the urban or suburban scheme; accessible to everyone by all means.



Target: Better Places!

Corporate America and its major retailers fueled by our consumer based economy has left an indelible mark on our landscapes. Is it time they also give back to enhance our general quality of life?

Is it asking too much to demand better quality places? Is it possible for corporations and local governments, and communities to work together to decide if there another direction our cities and towns can pursue or should we accept the status quo? Is it possible to create safe, vibrant, accessible places that achieve optimal land use policies that create a positive legacy for future generations?

Black Friday.



Target parking lot on “black Friday.” A vast wasteland on what is supposed to be the busiest shopping day of the year.

Conventional land use policies and ordinances have resulted in the forming our familiar “landscape.” As isolated and alienating as these “open spaces” are to humans, we have adapted and accepted them as normal.

Requiring deep (football field length) setbacks accomplishes two important goals; (1) Allows all the parking to be allocated in front so that is visible and accessible from the main road; (2) the building set-back does a good job of masking or trying to hide the “evils” of the big box store from view. The site pictured above illustrated these two obvious points.

When additional land for more over-

flow parking is allocated, the result is in our opinion as waste and miss-use of land that could potentially be used to add a mix of uses (besides retail out-parcels) including the radical concept of *public space*.

We believe that in the same way as Robert Moses, Calvert Vaux, and Frederick Law Olmsted gave thought to envisioning a bigger picture in creating places for people—we also believe it is possible for local governments, corporations, land owners, developers, and local communities to have the ability to work together in shaping cities, towns, and neighborhoods into better places for people to live, shop, and play.



Black Friday, November 23, 2012.

Designed to handle overflow vehicle parking yet no more than ten isolated cars are parked in the zone farthest away from the store.

Pavements to Parks

Reclaiming Pavement

Pavement to parks initiatives are referred to as “urban interventions” whereby in most cases streets are re-organized by somewhat temporary and inexpensive means that aim to measure the long term success of the project in making a small part of a city safer for pedestrians, and enjoyable places to be.

The San Francisco Planning Department in collaboration with local designers have been engaged in the “Pavement to Parks Program.”

The pilot program has reclaimed areas in the city and transformed them to create pedestrian friendly places, bike lanes, and access for transit development.

As the program becomes gains support from the local government and their supporters, these new places will become permanent urban fixtures and may well see the benefits that they are hoping to achieve. Apart from new public space for people, other benefits include



Above: More than enough ample parking made available courtesy of conventional zoning and parking regulations which more often than not will most likely never be used.

increased foot traffic for local businesses, and environmental benefits associated with reducing storm-water runoff while enhancing streetscapes with new landscaping and reclaimed materials.

Programs like these are a hopeful sign that well implemented initiatives are sprouting similar endeavors in more cities, and towns across the country.



Create Certified Wildlife Habitats

<http://www.nwf.org>

Conservation efforts even in small ways give urban/suburban neighborhoods and towns methods to improve their local places.

Organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation encourage and support communities (homes, schools, businesses, places of worship, community gardens, and nature centers) to participate in re-establishing nature conservancy and wildlife. Participants can register and receive wildlife habitat certification by following simple guidelines that meet minimum requirements.

These are: 1)providing food sources for wildlife with food provided naturally with plants (seeds, berries,

nuts, fruit, nectar, sap, pollen); 2)providing water source for wildlife; 3)providing shelter for wildlife to serve as protection from inclement weather or natural predators; 4)provide places to raise young (trees, dense shrubs, ponds, wetland, borrows). It is important to know which plants are helpful to your region and websites like <http://www.abnativeplants.com> (American Beauties) can provide useful information for anyone planning or building a garden. With so much information and resources available today, the process for developing wildlife habitats is simplified and accessible to all.

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Co-Founder and principal of Sol Architecture + Partners—NCARB certified Florida registered architect and urbanist with over 20 years of experience in Florida in a variety of public and private architectural projects.

A Florida native practice offering a full range of professional architectural and interior design services including planning and urban design.

Our Vision: “To serve our communities and support them by advocating and developing sustainable, livable, walkable, and diverse compact mixed-use neighborhoods, and towns.



Illustration: Javier De Juan

ACT NOW!

Learn more:

The Congress for the New Urbanism CNU.org

SmartGrowthAmerica.org

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SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

SMALL FOOTPRINT RETAIL

It is worthwhile noting that some retailers owe their enormous success not only because of their product but the amount of foot traffic they can potentially generate if given the chance.

