

## Revisiting Eden: The Olmsted Brothers' ecological plans for Los Angeles, 1914-1931

Christy O'Hara, Associate Professor

### Abstract:

Ecological planning relies on a keen awareness of relationships between biophysical and social processes, then uses this knowledge for decision making in accommodating for human needs. The value of this planning process allows for design intervention while also ensuring a sustained use of the landscape, with these insights blending skill and artistry into place-making. In the 1960s, environmental concerns galvanized a generation of landscape architects who first codified ecological planning as a rationale for decisions with environmental stewardship. While this is the accepted canon, in the early 20th century during a period of experimentation and exploration, the Olmsted Brothers landscape architecture firm was using ecological principles as foundations for landscape architecture practice. This dissertation challenges current discourse and accepted history, presenting evidence that the Olmsted Brothers' work in the 1920s predated many modern ecological theories and applications, and is an important addition to the historiography of ecological planning.

This dissertation largely focuses on Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. as the central historical figure, offering a more in-depth understanding of the evolution of the firm, and fills the gap of the Olmsted legacy. As the children of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1870 – 1957) along with his brother John Charles Olmsted (1852 – 1920) co-founded the Olmsted Brothers and created one of the most prolific landscape architecture practices, developing projects in all aspects of landscape design. The Olmsted Brothers' work in California accounts for over 200 projects, and ranks among the highest number of their 5000 designs developed in the United States. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Los Angeles offered significant ecological, cultural, and technological challenges for the firm, with the city's unbridled urbanization and proliferate use of water and automobility. Rich in solutions, the firm's built and proposed designs over the course of 20 years revealed the discipline of landscape architecture in its richest and most scalar form. From small scale gardens, residential communities, park and parkway systems, to open space and watershed planning, the Olmsted Brothers created public spaces that worked in relationship to the ecology of the region during a critical juncture in the history of regional planning in Southern California.

A range of methods were utilized in this dissertation. Primary data provided both qualitative and quantitative material for study and was extracted from letters, reports and writing, drawings, photos, plans and maps. Over 20,000 primary documents, written by the firm's principals, provided the basis for analysis, and in a new way, this dissertation interprets not only the written documents, but related construction documents developed from 1914 - 1931. As part of its data collection, an original contribution of this study is a comprehensive corpus of Olmsted Brothers source material from their work in Los Angeles. Methodologies sought to modify these documents into a spatial understanding of their work through digital analysis and re-creation of designs.

The Olmsted Brothers' design solutions provide insights into today's ongoing concerns about water management, sustainable urban planning, and multifunctional landscapes. Their design proposals solved multiple problems *with* the design, accounting for not only vast geography, but complex cultural and natural systems within it. The value of their ideas reflects landscape architecture solutions as

hybrid, dynamic, and strategic, offering 21<sup>st</sup> century practitioners paradigms in an ever-changing ecology.