

Landscape as Architecture

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“The landscape architect, who was first called a landscape gardener, is still surely wrongly named.”¹

—Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe

This issue of *Harvard Design Magazine* and its focus on the putative “core” of landscape architecture raise timely and fundamental questions of disciplinary and professional identity for the field. While the various etymologies of the term “landscape” have rightly preoccupied the field for decades, the formulation of “landscape architecture” as a professional identity has received less critical attention in recent years.²

Questions of professional nomenclature concerned proponents of the so-called “new art” since its inception in the 19th century. Long-standing debates over the formulation reveal a tension between the disciplinary identity and the scope of work for the landscape architect. Founders of the new field included a diverse array of positions—from those embodying a tradition of landscape gardening and rural improvement through those advocating for landscape as an architectural and urban art. Many American proponents of the field held ^[1]~~sep~~a strong cultural affinity for English practices of landscape gardening. In contrast, Continental practices of urban improvement allied with landscape promised a very different scope of work for the new professional. Complicating matters further was the desire by many for a distinct singular identity, not easily confused with any of the existing professional and artistic categories.

In its American formation this new field was imagined as a progressive response to the social and environmental challenges of rapid urbanization. While there was great enthusiasm for the articulation of a new profession attendant to those concerns, it was much less clear what to call the new profession and its related field of study. By the end of the 19th century the available professional identities (architect, engineer, gardener) were perceived by many to be inadequate to new conditions. These new conditions (urban, industrial) demanded a new professional identity explicitly associated with landscape.

What did it mean for the founders of this new field to claim landscape *as* architecture? What alternative identities were available to the founders of the field? How do those choices continue to inform the professional purview and intellectual commitments of the field today?

By the end of the 19th century, American boosters of the new art of landscape committed the nascent profession to an identity associated with the old art of architecture. This decision to identify architecture (as opposed to art, engineering, gardening) as the proximate professional peer group and cultural lens for the new art is significant for contemporary understandings of the “core” of landscape architecture. This history sheds compelling light on the subsequent development of city planning as a distinct professional identity spun out of landscape architecture in the first decades of the 20th century as well as debates regarding landscape as a form of urbanism at the close of the century.

A Brief Account

The English poet and gardener William Shenstone coined the English-language term “landscape gardener” in the middle of the 18th century. Humphry Repton adopted the term “landscape gardening” for the titles of his three major texts around the turn of the 19th century: *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1794); *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape*

The French architect, engineer, and garden designer Jean-Marie Morel is credited with the formulation *architecte-paysagiste*. Morel was, at the time of his death in 1810, among France's most notable designers advocating the English style in gardening. His obituary was widely circulated in France with the professional appellation *architecte-paysagiste*. Morel had previously described himself as *architecte et paysagiste*, a description of his multiple professional identities. Shortly after the turn of the 19th century, he elided the *et* in favor of a hyphenated compound. Two decades later, Morel would be referred to posthumously, sans hyphen, as simply *architecte paysagiste*. Morel's neologism predates the usage of the English term "landscape architect" and is generally considered as the origin of the modern professional identity.³

The first usage of the English-language compound "landscape architecture" is found in Gilbert Meason's *On the Landscape Architecture of the Great Painters of Italy* (1828). Meason used the neologism to refer specifically to architecture set in the context of Italian landscape painting. Twelve years later John Claudius Loudon used the same formulation on the title page of his publication of the collected works of Repton, *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the Late Humphry Repton, Esq.* (1840). While some debate persists regarding the precise meaning of landscape architecture in the title, it is reasonable to infer from the available evidence that Loudon, following Meason, was using the term to refer to architecture set within the landscape, rather than to describe Repton's practice, which is consistently referred to as landscape gardening in both the title and the text of the publication.⁴

Meason's and Loudon's publications and the formulation landscape architecture were certainly available to, and likely read by, American proponents of English taste in landscape gardening in the 19th century. Among the most prominent of those proponents was Andrew Jackson Downing, who would play a central role in advocating for the advance of the new art in America. Considered by many to have prepared the ground for the development of landscape architecture as a profession, Downing would have been aware of the formulation landscape architecture from Meason's book and admired Loudon's writing. Yet he persisted with his preference for the term "landscape gardening" throughout his career, from the publication of *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841) through his untimely death in 1852. In Section IX of *Treatise*, titled "Landscape or Rural Architecture," it is clear that Downing follows Meason in using the term to refer to architecture in landscape or rural contexts.⁵ By the time of Downing's death, at least one English garden designer, William Andrews Nesfield, was referred to in print as a landscape architect, in John Weale's *London Exhibited* (1852). Yet this formulation remained the exception in English practice throughout the 19th century.

In that same year, the French landscape gardener Louis-Sulpice Varé was appointed *jardiniere paysagiste* (landscape gardener) for the improvements at the Bois de Boulogne. By 1854, Varé stamped drawings of the Bois de Boulogne with an improvised seal reading "Service de l'architecte-paysagiste" (Office of the Landscape Architect).⁶ Varé was soon replaced by Adolphe Alphand and Jean-Pierre Barillet-Deschamps, yet his identification as a landscape architect would prove to be particularly important as the Bois de Boulogne emerged as the most significant precedent for the new Central Park in New York.

In 1857, Frederick Law Olmsted was appointed "Superintendent of the Central Park" in New York. After finding himself without prospects as his forays into farming and publishing had left him in debt, Olmsted eagerly pursued the position at the recommendation of Charles Wyllis Elliott, a family friend and member of the newly created Board of Commissioners of the Central Park. Elliott and the commissioners of the Central Park who appointed Olmsted subsequently awarded him (and his collaborator, the English architect Calvert Vaux) first prize in the design competition for the new park the following year, along a strictly political party line vote. Following their victory, Olmsted's title

While the proposal of one member of the Central Park board to invite Adolphe Alphand himself to serve as a member of the competition jury was unsuccessful, there is ample evidence that boosters of the new park looked to Paris for their urban inspiration. One member of the advisory board, James Phalen, retired to Paris in 1856, funded, at least in part, by profits from the sale of land that formed part of the new Central Park. On his arrival in Paris, Phalen requested, on behalf of the Central Park board, a history of the improvements to the Bois de Boulogne presently under way as part of Alphand’s larger urban project. Phalen also introduced Olmsted to Alphand during Olmsted’s 1859 tour of European park precedents to gather models for the implementation and management of Central Park. Alphand met with Olmsted multiple times at the Bois de Boulogne and provided background information and guided tours of his program of urban improvements.⁸

From the time of Olmsted’s first appointment as superintendent in 1857 and through his subsequent elevation to architect-in-chief in 1858, he made no reference to the professional title landscape architect. While Olmsted may have been aware of the French formulation *architecte-paysagiste*, and would certainly have been aware of the English-language antecedents of Meason and Loudon, there is no evidence that Olmsted conceived of the term as a professional identity before his November 1859 visit to Paris. The term emerged only subsequent to Olmsted’s tour of European parks and his multiple meetings with Alphand at the Bois de Boulogne in November of that year. Associated with the improvements at the Bois de Boulogne, Olmsted would likely have seen drawings stamped “Service de l’architecte-paysagiste” and, more significantly, witnessed the expanded scope of Parisian practice in which landscape gardening was set in relation to infrastructural improvements, urbanization, and the management of large public projects. During his extensive tour of European parks and urban improvements, Olmsted visited the Bois de Boulogne more than any other precedent project, making eight visits in two weeks.⁹ Upon his return to New York in late December 1859, every subsequent professional commission that Olmsted accepted for urban improvements included specific reference to the professional formulation landscape architect.

The earliest recorded evidence of the professional title landscape architect in America is found in personal correspondence from Olmsted to his father, John Olmsted, in July 1860. This letter, and subsequent correspondence, refers to the April 1860 commissioning of Olmsted and Vaux as “Landscape Architects” by the “Commissioners for laying out the upper part of New York island.” Among those commissioners charged with the planning of northern Manhattan above 155th Street was Henry Hill Elliott, the older brother of Central Park Commissioner Charles Wyllis Elliott who had originally recommended Olmsted for the position of superintendent.¹⁰ It is likely that the Elliott brothers played equally significant roles in the development of landscape architecture as a profession, one through commissioning Olmsted with responsibility for Central Park, the other through conferring upon him the title of “Landscape Architect” associated with the planning of the extension of the city. The first appointment of a landscape architect in America was not for the design of a park, pleasure ground, or public garden. The new professional was first commissioned with the planning of northern Manhattan. In this context the landscape architect was originally conceived as a professional responsible for divining the shape of the city itself, rather than pastoral exceptions to it.

In April 1862, as evidence of their enthusiasm for the new collective identity, Olmsted and Vaux had their appointments clarified as “Landscape Architects to the Board” of Central Park. Following the interruption of the Civil War years, they were reappointed “Landscape Architects to the Board of Commissioners of Central Park” in July 1865. In May of the following year, Olmsted and Vaux were appointed “Landscape Architects” for Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and the formulation was well on its way to being consolidated as the definitive professional identity for American practitioners of the new art.¹¹

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In spite of his conversion to the new formulation, Olmsted remained “all the time bothered with the miserable nomenclature” of landscape architecture and longed for a new term to stand for the “sylvan art.” He groused that

“*Landscape* is not a good word, *Architecture* is not; the combination is not. *Gardening* is worse.” He longed for specific English translations for the French terms that more adequately captured the subtleties of the new art of urban order.¹² So the question persists, given the long-standing anxiety of conflating landscape *with* architecture, why did proponents of the new profession ultimately choose to claim landscape *as* architecture? Olmsted was convinced that adopting the mantle of the architect would bolster the new field in the eyes of the public, and mitigate against the tendency to mistake the work as being primarily concerned with plants and gardens. It would also, Olmsted argued, guard against the “greater danger” of landscape’s potential future “disalliance” with architecture. Olmsted became convinced that the range of study that was called for by increasing demands of scientific knowledge would press the new profession toward increasing reliance on specialized bodies of technical knowledge, and a resulting alienation from the fine arts and architecture.¹³

By the final decade of the 19th century, enthusiasm had built for the claiming of a new profession. While many antecedent practices on both sides of the Atlantic predated the founding, the first such professional body, the American Society of Landscape Architects, was formed in 1899. Based on Olmsted’s successful advocacy for the French formulation, American founders of the field ultimately adopted the Francophone “landscape architect” over the Anglophone “landscape gardener” as the most suitable professional nomenclature for the new art. Based on this formulation, and its claim to practices of urban order and infrastructural arrangement, the profession was first fully embodied in America.

In spite of Olmsted’s stature, and decades of precedent, many of the founders of the Society chaffed at the formulation “landscape architect.” Beatrix Farrand rejected the term outright, and persisted in her preference for the English landscape gardener. As evidence of this ambivalence, the original constitution of the Society invited fellowship from either landscape gardeners or landscape architects in good standing. The larger concern among the founders of the field was to establish the new art as a “liberal profession” rather than a commercial activity. Thus, the constitution invited members who earned their livelihood from the professional activity of design, rather than commissions from the selling of labor, plants, or other commercial interests.¹⁴

Following the establishment of the professional association, the new profession quickly set about establishing a new academic discipline and professional journal. The first academic program in landscape architecture was founded in 1900 at Harvard where it was housed alongside architecture in the Lawrence Scientific School as a liberal art and profession. The development of the academic discipline and programs of study, as well as the subsequent founding of *Landscape Architecture* as a quarterly journal in 1910, consolidated the institutional foundation for the new profession.¹⁵

The professional identity of the landscape architect and the professional field of landscape architecture were consolidated as the definitive formulations internationally through the foundation of the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) in 1948. In spite of his role in founding the international professional body, no less a figure than Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe expressed his misgivings about the formulation landscape architect, shortly after stepping down as founding president.¹⁶ In spite of Jellicoe’s lingering anxiety, the field has been increasingly coherent in its commitment to be identified internationally through the claiming of landscape as architecture. In so doing, it has recommitted to its origins in the urban and infrastructural arts, and reanimated the potential of landscape as a medium through which to remediate the social, environmental, and cultural conditions of the contemporary city.

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1. The quote is from a paper Jellicoe delivered to the International Federation of Landscape Architects in 1960. In his address, Jellicoe argues that the profession is still searching for its professional identity. It should be a single word, distinct from other fields, for all cultures. Geoffrey Jellicoe, "A Table for Eight," in *Space for Living: Landscape Architecture and the Allied Arts and Professions*, ed. Sylvia Crowe (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1961), 18. Thanks to Gareth Doherty for bringing this reference to my attention.

2. Joseph Disponzio's work on this topic has been a rare exception in tracing the origins of the professional identity. His doctoral dissertation and subsequent publications on the topic offer the definitive account of the emergence of the French formulation architecte-paysagiste as the origin of professional identity of the landscape architect. See Disponzio, "The Garden Theory and Landscape Practice of Jean-Marie Morel" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2000), 5–9. See also Disponzio, "Jean-Marie Morel and the Invention of Landscape Architecture," in *Tradition and Innovation in French Garden Art: Chapters of a New History*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Michel Conan (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 135–59; and Disponzio, "History of the Profession," *Landscape Architectural Graphic Standards*, ed. Leonard J. Hopper (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2007), 5–9.

3. Disponzio, "Jean-Marie Morel and the Invention of Landscape Architecture," 151–52.

4. Ibid., 153.

5. Disponzio, "History of the Profession," 6–7.

6. Ibid., 5.

7. Charles E. Beveridge and David Schuyler, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, vol. 3, "Creating Central Park 1857–1861" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 26–28; 45, 73.

8. Ibid., 241, 11n. See also *Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Central Park*, vol. 2, ed. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), 31; as well as Board of Commissioners of the Central Park, Minutes, October 21, 1858, 140; November 16, 1858, 148.

9. Beveridge and Schuyler, *Olmsted Papers*, vol. 3, "Creating Central Park," 234–35.

10. Ibid., 256–57; 257, 4n; 267, 1n.

11. Olmsted, *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture*, 11, biographical notes; David Schuyler and Jane Turner Censer, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, vol. 6, "The Years of Olmsted, Vaux & Co., 1865–1874" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 5; 46, 8n.

12. Victoria Post Ranney, ed., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, vol. 5, "The California Frontier, 1863–1865" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 422.

13. Charles E. Beveridge, Carolyn F. Hoffman, and Kenneth Hawkins, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, vol. 7, "Parks, Politics, and Patronage, 1874–1882" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 225–26.

14. Constitution of the American Society of Landscape Architects, adopted March 6, 1899. See also Melanie Simo, *100 Years of Landscape Architecture: Some Patterns of a Century* (Washington, DC: ASLA Press, 1999).

15. See Melanie L. Simo, *The Coalescing of Different Forces and Ideas: A History of Landscape Architecture at Harvard, 1900–1999* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2000).

16. See Jellicoe, "A Table for Eight," 21.

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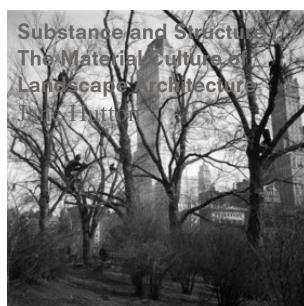
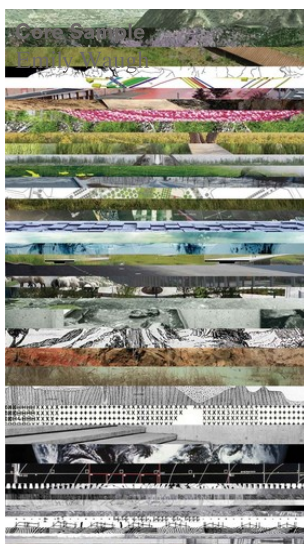
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