

# Imparting Olmsted's Legacy Abroad: An Exhibition Series in Beijing, China

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## Abstract

In the first integrated-exhibition of its kind, our team of Chinese landscape architects and American scholars showcased the influence and impact of Frederick Law Olmsted's work on the American landscape through a three-month Exhibition, a Symposium and Reference Book launch at Beijing's National Museum of Chinese Gardens and Landscape Architecture. The Exhibition featured a meticulously curated collection of Olmsted's most significant works, organized into six distinct thematic sections spread over 6500 square-feet. In tandem with the Exhibition was a Symposium that assembled leading Chinese landscape architects, government officials and scholars, and a 230-page Chinese-English Resource Book "Designing America's Landscape - Olmsted and His Works" to serve future generations of designers and scholars. This integrated-exhibition afforded a broad audience - students, professionals, government officials, and the general public - a multi-faceted and comprehensive understanding of Olmsted's approach to design and how they can be consulted to inform the work of urban development in China. With a visitorship of 112,500, this groundbreaking exhibition aimed to germinate and advance the sustainable urban design movement in China.

The Olmsted exhibit in China was conceived, researched, and produced in partnership with the museum's curatorial staff with technical assistance from institutions in both the U.S. and China, including the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic site, the US National Park Service, and the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University. A lavish collection of historic photographs and newly collected educational materials illustrated Olmsted's professional contribution and how heightening qualities within natural landscapes can protect dense urban areas from flooding, create public spaces that provide a safe and healthy respite, and foster a legacy of preserved natural and cultural landscapes. Furthermore, the exhibit showcased Olmsted's vision and how the profession can improve the quality of life and create sustainable environments.

The Olmsted exhibit was held at the Museum of Chinese Gardens and Landscape Architecture, which receives approximately 450,000 visitors annually. This is the first and only national museum in the world that is primarily focused on landscape architecture. Since the exhibit concluded, portions of the exhibit, including scale models of Central Park and Boston's Emerald Necklace are now on permanent display in a prominent location at the entrance to the museum. The now-permanent inclusions ensure that Olmsted exhibit will continue to impact and influence contemporary Chinese landscape architecture.

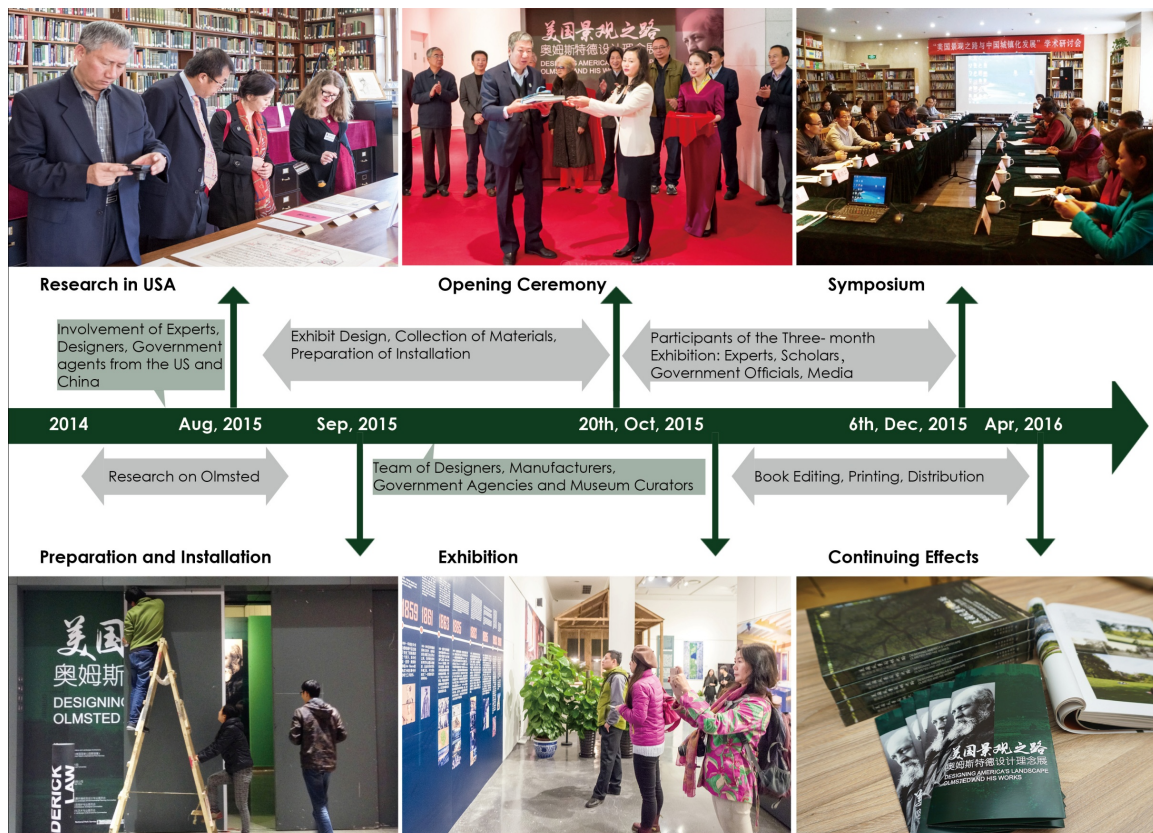
Keywords: Olmsted; Prospect Park; Urban park; Emerald Necklace; Greenway; Exhibitions

## Introduction

In 2016, the author and a team of Chinese landscape architects and American scholars conducted a series of activities including a major museum exhibit, published materials including brochures and a major guidebook on the exhibit, and a symposium on the legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted in America and its significance and meaning for contemporary China.

## Goals and Objectives

This broad suite of events and publications was, and continues to be, highly relevant and topical to modern China. The exhibition contained a clear and timely message: Olmsted's philosophy of elevating utility within the natural landscape by melding conservation with design can be used to guide China's urban growth. Where rapid land development characterizes current practice in China today, Olmsted's design approach provides a counterpoint.



**Fig 1: Timeline - The Exhibition preparation lasted over one year, and it became a platform for communication among professionals, government staff, and the public in China and America.**

## Background and Literature Review

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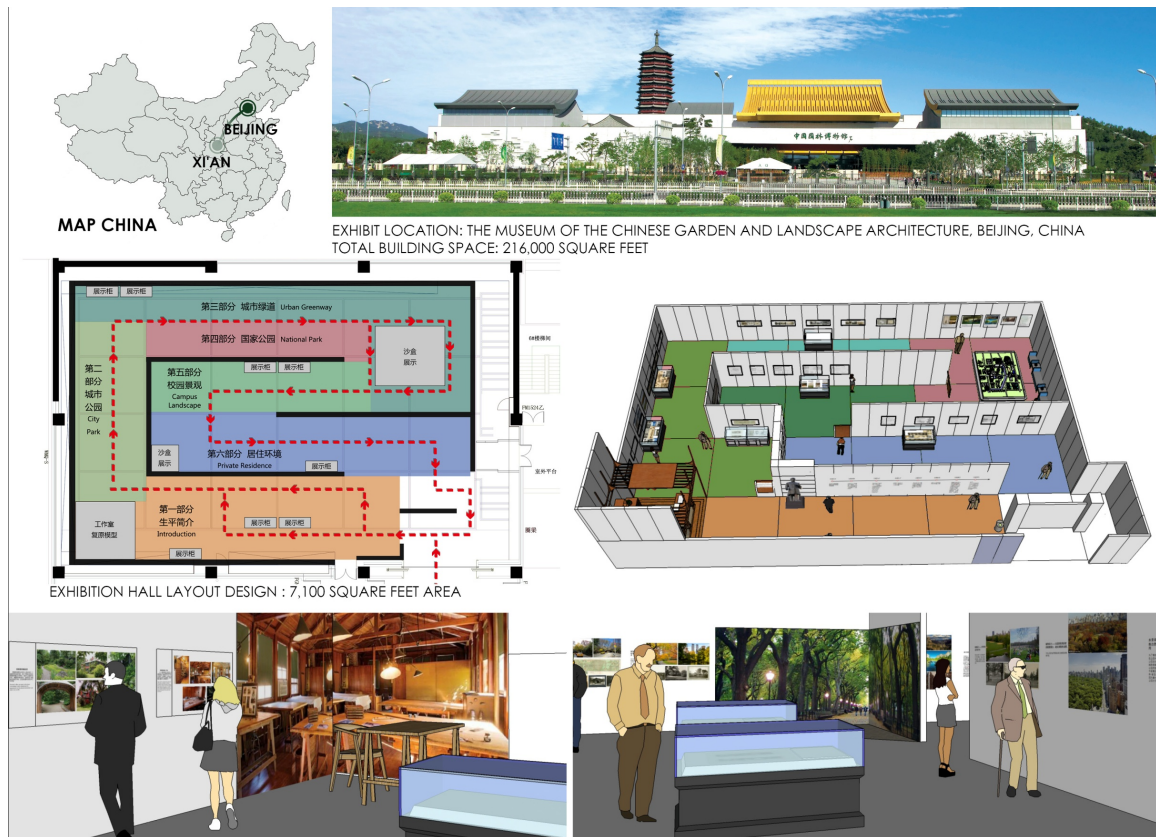
of Harvard University. It included research on Olmsted, preparation, design and installation, exhibition items, and a variety of publications (Fig. 1). A lavish collection of historic photographs and newly collected educational materials illustrated Olmsted's professional contribution and how heightening qualities within natural landscapes can protect dense urban areas from flooding, create public spaces that provide a safe and healthy respite, and foster a legacy of preserved natural and cultural landscapes. Furthermore, the exhibit showcased Olmsted's vision and how the profession can improve the quality of life and create sustainable environments.

### **Approaches and Outcome Results**

The Olmsted exhibit was held at the Museum of Chinese Gardens and Landscape Architecture, which receives approximately 450,000 visitors annually. The project team was responsible for programming, obtaining grant funds, planning, design, and exhibition installation. This is the first and only national museum in the world that is primarily focused on landscape architecture. Attendance at the Olmsted exhibit was estimated at 112,500 visitors during the three-month exhibition period. Since the exhibit concluded, portions of the exhibit, including scale models of Central Park and Boston's Emerald Necklace are now on permanent display in a prominent location at the entrance to the museum. The now-permanent inclusions ensure that the Olmsted exhibit will continue to impact and influence contemporary Chinese landscape architecture.

The exhibit included a comprehensive history of Olmsted's work organized in six thematic sections: Olmsted's Biography; The Beginnings of American City Parks; The Creation of Urban Greenways; Olmsted's Contribution to the Establishment of the US National Park System; Campus Design; and Olmsted's work in Residential Development. The exhibit presented each theme with a diversity of media to engage a wide range of audiences.

The exhibit included photo and text boards, scale models, videos and historical artifacts to tell Olmsted's story effectively. The team selected the exhibit materials from over a million items in the historical U.S. archive of Olmsted's writing, literature, and design documents. More than 90 large format images, photographs, and reproduced landscape architecture drawings, created by Olmsted and his office were framed for the exhibit. All exhibit items were referenced with original item numbers to sources to provide additional information for students and scholars. Explanations and titles were all translated to Chinese, to ensure ready access to the Chinese audience (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2. The exhibition was held in the Museum of the Chinese Garden and Landscape Architecture in Beijing which has 450,000 visitors annually.**

**Section 1, The Biography of Olmsted:** Because the grounds of the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Fairsted, Massachusetts are a rare resource in the history of American Landscape, the team decided to reproduce a 14'x15' life-size mock-up of Olmsted's design studio to provide the visitor a window into his life. A 10'x36' illustrated mural detailed a timeline of important events in Olmsted's career, while a video played showcasing the Chinese team's visit to Fairsted, including Chinese subtitles. This section celebrated his writing, designs, studio, family stories, and legacy in establishing the Landscape Architecture profession.

**Section 2, The Beginning of American City Parks:** Olmsted's approach to developing public spaces by combining artistic excellence with landscape conservation is illustrated in his most celebrated city park designs: Central Park and Prospect Park. Along with historic stories providing insight into the formation of the parks, this section introduced the social background, traffic system, planting design, grading and landforms, layout, construction and cost management of park systems.

**Section 3, The Creation of Urban Greenways:** The Boston Park System was one of the most complex undertakings of Olmsted's career. A 14'x14' (at 1:2000 scale) model of the "Emerald Necklace" was built, displaying the linked greenway system. The model, in comparison to a display of historic drawings or modern scenic photos, made it easier for visitors to visualize the fundamental components of the park's character as a testament to Olmsted's green infrastructure innovation, and garnered much attention.

**Section 4, Olmsted's Contribution in the Establishment of US National Park System:** China is in the process of establishing its own new national park system and is looking to the US National Park System as a model for their own. By calling attention to Olmsted's contribution to the creation of the US Park System, the team hoped the exhibit could benefit and inform the technical advisors and policymakers of China.

**Section 5, Campus Design:** A collection the campus designs of Olmsted and his office were featured. The project team selected many modern-day photographs of several world-famous campuses Olmsted was involved in planning and designing. A slideshow showcasing his campus work played on a screen as visitors passed through the exhibit.

**Section 6, Olmsted's Design Work in Residential Development:** Foremost in Olmsted conceptualizations of residential design was the idea that body and spirit could be healed through close association with nature. This principal is very important in planning new urban development in China. The ambition of the exhibit designers was to raise the awareness as to the potential health and social dimensions that can be integrated in future residential designs, especially in dense urban areas of China.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As a supplement to the exhibit, the team designed and produced a brochure containing a summary overview of the Olmsted exhibition highlights for museum visitors. To extend the exhibit's influence on professionals and scholars, an Olmsted-themed symposium was also held. Many top Chinese experts and scholars from the field of Landscape Architecture participated. They discussed similar issues that contemporary Chinese landscape architects face regarding urbanization, public space, landscape conservation and urban design at many scales. The symposium has inspired many subsequent scholarly papers on the meaning and application of Olmsted's legacy to China today. The exhibition has clearly had a strong and lasting effect on the scholarship of landscape architectural history and its influence on contemporary practice.



**Fig. 3 : A guidebook recording the whole process was produced by this project team.**



A 230 page guidebook, "*Designing America's Landscape - Olmsted and his Works*" was produced detailing the wealth of information brought to China by the exhibit. (Fig.3) The 1,000 copies of the guidebook were funded by a grant and widely distributed to professionals and university libraries throughout China and are available for future museum visitors. The exhibition book has successfully captured Olmsted's key ideas and achievements in the important context of contemporary China, documented the process of the exhibition, collected new research papers, and remains as the legacy of the exhibit. Beyond the printed materials, the exhibit reached the popular Chinese social media outlet of Wechat with discussions in a chat group consisting of over 100 Chinese landscape architects sharing their opinions and insights garnered from the exhibit. The project team presented a lecture on Olmsted in April of 2017 at Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, illustrating that even over a year after the exhibit ended, the influence continues.

The net effect of this Exhibition Series was highly successful at bringing Olmsted's vision, approach to design, and scope of design strategies to a diverse audience at a particularly relevant time in guiding China's future growth.

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