

Frederick Law Olmsted's Public Parks, Parkways and their influence on the Continent

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Introduction

The connections between European and American park design have been the subject of a considerable body of research (e.g. Bowe, 1995). However, relatively little has been written on the extent to which European public parks have exerted an influence on the development of American urban green spaces, and the reciprocal effect of these open spaces on European park design.

The main goal of this paper is to examine how Frederick Law Olmsted's European travels influenced his planning concepts, what he considered as his precedents, and how he put these in practical uses. Adopting a continental point of view, the focus will be in particular on how Olmsted's ideas developed from his European travels appeared in scholarly writings and designs, with a special focus on the Hungarian examples.

Literature Review

The influence of Europe on Frederick Law Olmsted plays an important part in the publications about his life and career, the research performed on the history of English public parks, and the development of the urban green structures. (e.g. Fabos – Milde - Weinmayr 1968; Macdonald 2005; Beveridge 2007; Conway 2001; Jørgensen, 2005.) The theoretical principles he developed not only are an important part of the literature about his work, but also influenced research about the planning theory and concepts of public parks (e. g. Jones – Willis, 2005).

The Continental publications about Olmsted's seminal designs usually focus on the effect his greenway systems have played in the history and development of urban green systems (e. g. Jørgensen, 2005). The effect his new public parks and park systems have exerted on the theoretical changes of Continental park design is less well documented.

Olmsted's influence on German landscape gardeners was mentioned by the main researchers of the topic, Dieter Hennebo and Erika Schmidt (e. g. Hennebo 1971; Schmidt 1989). Olmsted's impact through seminal German designs was examined also in Austria and Hungary (e.g. Hajós 2007; Loidl-Reisch 1995; Sisa 2007; Csepely-Knorr 2010), but the direct American influence has not been investigated in the case of Hungarian public parks.

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Goals and objectives

This paper will first present an overview of the most important urban green elements Olmsted visited during his travels in Europe and used as precedents in his designs for public parks and parkway systems. Secondly after examining the aforementioned themes, the research will focus on the main theoretical and functional applications and changes in the case of the American urban green spaces and systems, designed by Olmsted and the English architect Calvert Vaux. Finally, Olmsted's theoretical principles will be analysed in respect of how they appear in European professional writings, particularly Hungary, Germany, and Austria. This paper's overarching purpose will be theoretical, such that formal and stylistic issues will not be examined.

Method

This paper is based on research performed on the basis of primary sources, theoretical writings, letters, reports and journal articles written by Olmsted and his contemporaries on the Continent. In order to identify the European examples that influenced Olmsted, and to highlight the main novelties of his theories, his letters, essays and articles about parks, parkways and park systems were taken as the main basis. To examine his influence on continental design, two basic sources were used. Gustav Meyer's *Lehrbuch der schönen Gartenkunst*, helps to highlight the fact that the main design elements were important for contemporary German designers, whilst in the case of Hungarian parks, Meyer's writings were significant sources for the landscape gardeners, who were mainly German (Meyer 1873, Csepely-Knorr 2010).

The effect of Olmsted's designs in the case of Hungary can be examined through Meyer's work. However, there are also direct connections between the United States and Hungary. With detailed analysis of contemporary Hungarian specialist periodicals, it is possible to identify the models with which the designers of the end of the 19th century were familiar.

Results

English and American academics agree that Olmsted's first park design was influenced by Sir Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park, near the city of Liverpool in England, which he visited when he first travelled in Europe, in 1850 (e.g. Beveridge 2007; Conway 1991). Between 1855 and 1857, he worked as a publicist, and returned to Europe for six months. During this period he visited many public parks, which also influenced his thinking, particularly with respect to the Parkway idea.

If we want to discover the main sources for his park design theory, Birkenhead Park should be the starting point. His writings about it shed light on aspects he considered exemplary. Birkenhead Park was the first fully open public park which he visited, and influenced him, both theoretically and functionally (i.e., in terms how people

used it). The main novelty was the interpretation of the function of a park. As Jones and Willis mention, for the Americans before Olmsted's work, the term 'park' meant something like "aristocratic old world decadence" (Jones – Willis 2005.). As he wrote in his article about the Birkenhead park, "all this magnificent pleasure-ground is entirely, unreservedly, and forever the People's own. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts, as the British Queen" (Olmsted 1851). This experience determined the meaning of the park in his theory and design. According to him and his Partner, Calvert Vaux, the Public Park became the symbol of democracy. Their generic aim was to make recreational and entertainment possibilities for everyone, and this made their work revolutionary in the field of public park design. Apart from the fact that it could be used by everybody at any time for free, what he was captivated by was the route-system and the architectural elements of the park.

The comparison of his design of Central Park with Paxton's design of Birkenhead Park, can be established that their formal solutions are essentially different. His main goals in designing Central Park that are obvious from his writings about it were to focus on the elements mentioned above: to allow different kinds of activities in the park, functions for everyone in every age. He planned a lake for boating and skating in winter, playgrounds, sports grounds, flower garden, Music hall, and Arsenal in strong connection with the aim of the democratized park. His traffic systems, where the pedestrian and carriageways are separated in two different levels, serve as future precedents.



Figure 1. Sir Joseph Paxton's plan for Birkenhead Park, c.1845, and the so called Greensward plan by Olmsted and Vaux 1858. (Conway, Hazel: People's Parks. The design and development of Victorian Parks in Britain. Cambridge, 1991. p 88; <http://www.brynmawr.edu/Acads/Cities/imgb/nextone/med/1042.jpg>)

Before presenting the results of the influences of American public park design on Hungarian thinking, another aspect of Olmsted's work needs to be investigated. This is the idea of the *Parkway*. Olmsted first wrote about it in 1868, when he was planning Prospect Park in Brooklyn (Olmsted – Vaux, 1868). The special significance of this article is apparent through the presentation of the works that influenced him in designing his parkways, thus revealing another, relatively rarely mentioned European source of influence on his work. In comparing and analysing European city structures and street systems he had been most impressed by Sir Christopher Wren's London plan, the Avenue of the Empress in Paris, and the Unter den Linden Avenue in Berlin, he visited during his second travel in Europe. A deep insight into these layouts, and many other European examples helped him synthesize his knowledge to work out this unique solution. His Park and Parkway systems, which determine the cities he worked for, even today, were the first steps to planning integral greenway systems in the cities.



Figure 2. Unter den Linden Promenade, Berlin, 1691.

(<http://localecologist.blogspot.com/2009/12/tree-walk-unter-den-linden.html>)

In order to examine the main factors of Olmsted's influence on the Hungarian designs, two different primary sources can be considered; the most influential theoretical writings of Gustav Meyer, his park designs, and the contemporary professional journals, should be analysed.

Gustav Meyer, the garden director of the city of Berlin, and a pupil of Peter Joseph Lenné, published his theoretical book, *Lehrbuch der schönen Gartenkunst* in 1860, in which he also dealt with the design theory of the public park. He used Central Park as a major example of public park design, and highlighted two aspects which he found remarkable. First, he drew attention to the importance of the activities people can perform in public parks, like skating or boating, and he praised different architectural elements like the bandstand. He also acknowledged Olmsted's mastery in creating a suitable traffic system. In Meyer's opinion, the traffic and pedestrian routes separated on two levels in Central Park are examples to be followed. Figure 3 shows images from the time when Central Park was opened. Meyer most probably saw pictures similar to these, when he wrote about Central Park, as he himself had never visited the States.

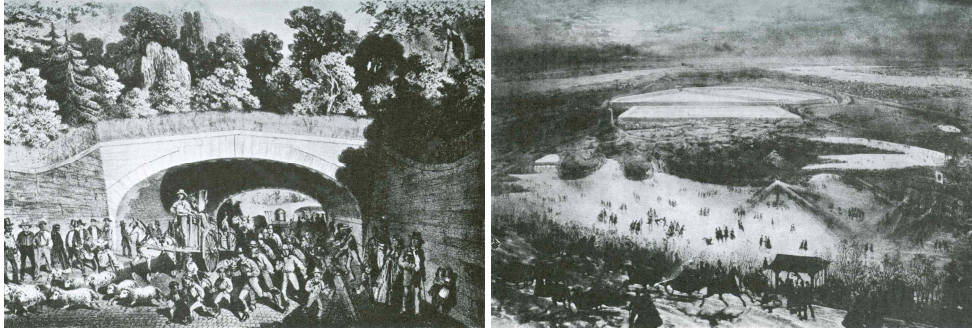


Figure 3. The Central Park in the 1850-1860's. (Olmsted, Frederick Law Jr – Kimball, Theodora: *Forty years of Landscape Architecture Central Park*. Cambridge – London 1973. p 49, 67.)

Meyer's plan for the Friedrichshain in Berlin – which is considered as a summary of his theories – served in many respects as a theoretical foundation for the designs of the Türkenschantzpark in Vienna, and the Népliget ('People's Grove') in Budapest (Loidl-Reisch 1995, Csepely-Knorr 2010). Nevertheless, the above connection between Hungarian and American public parks is a very remote one; further and more convincing direct links can be established if we examine contemporary Hungarian writings.

The topics of American Parks and Parkway systems frequently appear in Hungarian scientific journals at the turn of the 19th century. Professionals, who travelled to the States, wrote about these in order to provide examples for future designers. Journals like 'A Kert' (*The Garden*), and the 'Kertészeti Lapok' (*Gardening Journal*) were the main forums for professional discussions in Hungary. Furthermore, the articles in these journals are primary sources about the professional life of the period. Surveying these helps an understanding not only of the development of Hungarian public park design but also of the sources they drew upon. In the remaining part of this article, I would like to trace Olmsted's influence by focusing on issues which appear both in these articles and in Olmsted's writings.

From the point of view of public parks, mention must be made of the article series of Károly Vértesy about the park system of Chicago (Vértesy 1909). Although not all the green spaces of the city were designed by Olmsted, the main conclusions of the article represent Olmsted's principles. Vértesy spoke highly of the rich variety of the park facilities, for example in the Jackson and Washington parks, planned by Olmsted and Vaux. These include: swimming in the lake, relaxing in the bath, using the playground or the football ground and visiting special architectural elements, like the Japanese Church. The article also raised the problem where, in the United States, people were allowed to step on the grass in appointed areas, whereas in many Hungarian parks it was strictly forbidden. As having to keep off the grass limits the opportunities of the park users, it became a major issue in Hungarian critical writings.

Vértesy's writing reflects upon the discussion of the contemporary professionals about the topic of park users. The main question was whether it is possible to allow everybody to use every part of the park, or whether their use should be limited. The widely published precedents of foreign public parks, and the changing sociological climate contributed to the democratization of public green space in Budapest.

Another important aspect highlighted by Vértesy was the fact that, although these two parks are located in suburban areas, they are within easy reach as building a train station was also a part of the design. Olmsted in his report to the South Park Commission also mentioned that a suburban park needs design considerations that are different from an urban park in the city centre (Olmsted 1871). Olmsted proved to be right as the case of Népliget ('People's Grove') shows. Népliget ('People's Grove'), a public park in Budapest, was located in a suburban area, and suffered from the problem of having very few visitors. Building a train station later solved the problem.

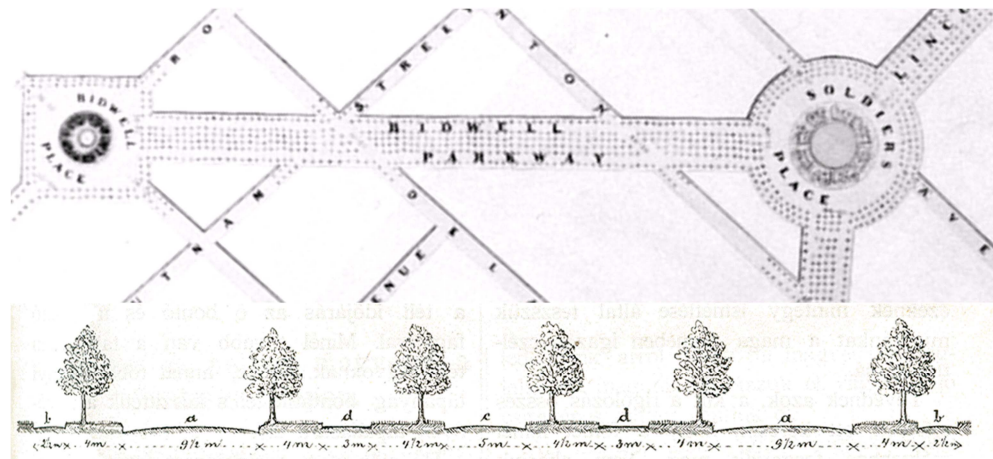


Figure 4. The Bidwell Parkway, Buffalo. Olmsted's original design, and a cross-section from an archive Hungarian Journal

(<http://www.buffaloah.com/h/olm/beveridge/source/10.html>, S.A. 1902: Parkozott utak Amerikában III. (Parkways in America). *A Kert (The Garden)* VIII. (1902) 1. p. 19.)

Examples of the parkway also appeared in the professional journals in Hungary. In the journal 'A Kert' ('The Garden'), between 1901 and 1902, there is a series of articles in which many of Olmsted's parkways are introduced (S. A. 1901, 1902). They contain cross-sections and pictures as well as detailed descriptions of the functions and the different types of lane traffic. The unknown author of the articles also provided very meticulous descriptions of the plants, trees and shrubs, and examined the maintenance problems as well. He was fascinated by the tram rails set in grass that allowed pedestrians to walk in this area and therefore avoid vehicular roads.

Besides the fact that the very rich illustrations are a very important image source, it is also important to note that the author knew and visited many American cities, and wrote descriptions of them. For instance, he mentions in his essays places such as Rochester, Boston and Buffalo. His pictures and drawings of these urban green systems could make it possible to use Olmsted's work as a model in Hungary. The first years of the 20th Century was this period in the history of Budapest during which the large scale plans were developed. Although, the possibility of a complex Parkway-system in Hungary at that time hasn't been established, the articles seem to have shaped the attitude of the readers.

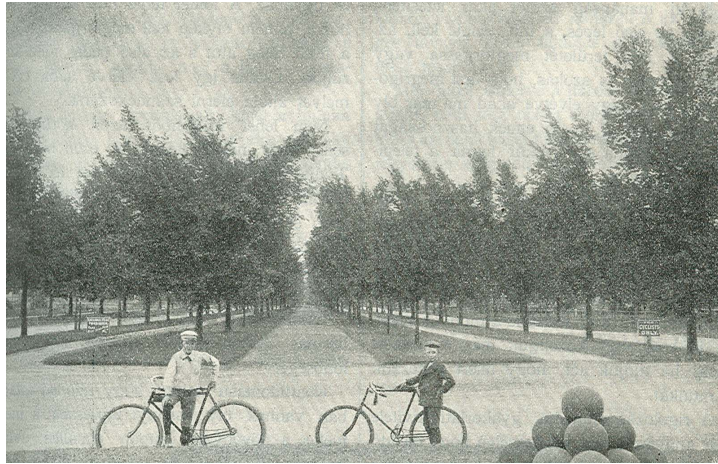


Figure 5. The Bidwell Parkway, Buffalo Archive photograph from an archive Hungarian Journal (S.A. 1902: Parkozott utak Amerikában III. (Parkways in America). *A Kert (The Garden)* VIII. (1902) 1. p. 19.)

Conclusion

The aim of my research was to determine the extent to which European park models influenced Olmsted, and then to see how he adapted these to his designs, and to trace and show the effects of Olmsted's design in the history of designing the urban green space in Hungary at the turn of the 19th century. To meet this end, my method was to turn to primary sources – theoretical writings, contemporary articles and letters – and examine the connections between European parks and American parks. My findings reveal that Olmsted and his designs had considerable influence in the field of public parks and parkways in a period which attracted a lot of criticism in the 20th century for its lack of functions and activities in existing public parks. This is an aspect which began to change in the Continental garden design at the time I examined, and Olmsted's contribution to the change is undeniable.

The Parkways and Park-systems planned by Olmsted and Vaux were also known in Hungary. At the time when the dialogue about the city's green system and the need for the green belt in cities began, the pictures and drawings of American examples must have given inspiration to the Hungarian designers (e.g. green system for the city of Szeged, green-belt plans for the city of Budapest).

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