It Isn't Green Cheese
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Architecture

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THE Congress of the United States has proposed to celebrate the Frederick Law Olmsted Sesquicentennial this year by destroying the Olmsted-designed terraces along the west front of the Capitol, together with the west front of the Capitol. That proposal is not dead, but fortunately, it is dying down.

New York City's Parks Department celebrated in a more constructive way recently with a 150th birthday gala that included a green cheesecake in the shape of Olmsted's Central Park and someone dressed up in a hat and cape to represent the gentleman himself. It was hard to tell him from those Sunday strollers for whom such costumes are normal attire, except that he issued expansive statements that would probably have glazed Olmsted's eyes.

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A national Olmsted Sesquicentennial Committee has been set up in Washington chaired by urban authority Frederick Gutheim. A major Olmsted exhibition, directed by William Alex, will be held at New York's Whitney Museum this fall. Other celebrations of Olmsted's birth will take place in Atlanta, Boston and Chicago.

All this admirable hoopla makes it sound as if Frederick Law Olmsted is a man whose time has come. It came, actually, in the 1850's, with Greensward, his prize-winning entry with Calvert Vaux in the Central Park competition, which set a philosophy of rural and urban relationships and landscape design in terms of open space and the city psyche that helped shape urban America.

What has come, and is really overdue, is recognition. Olmsted's contribution to American cities and society, as one of the prime and catalytic movers in progressive 19th-century currents, is vastly underrated. He is an extraordinary figure in American history, Jeffersonian in vision, although his vision espoused rather than rejected cities, and almost unparalleled in achievement.

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By the end of the century that vision had been realized on an immense scale. He was the acknowledged father of American landscape architecture, with the design of parks and park systems from San Francisco's Golden Gate to St. Louis's Forest Park, Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, Prospect and Central Parks in New York, and Franklin Park in Boston to his credit. A founder of the state and national park systems, including the preserves of Yosemite and the Mesa Verde, his work embraced the wilderness as well. As William Alex points out, Olmsted "is probably responsible for the betterment and preservation of more of the earth's surface than anyone else."

Like many figures picked up by the 20th century and filtered through its biases, Olmsted is massively misunderstood. In New York, the arguments have focused on Central Park, in the never-ending war against encroachment, with Olmsted quoted and misquoted to support everyone's point of view.

His intentions are not that difficult to divine. He was a 19th-century man, in the most innovative sense. To falsely interpret him as a 20th-century man is to lose much of the character and importance of his achievements.

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It is essential to realize, for example, that before Olmsted, according to Lewis Mumford, there was nothing that could be called a park in America. It must also be understood that he planned paternalistically, "for the accommodation and gratification of immense numbers of . . . the great, industrious, moderately-thriving, decent, self-respecting class, the children of which mainly fill the common schools." It is only our own generation that has made that a pejorative description or a dubious act.

He would have been startled by today's democratic activism, thinly-separated from vandalism. To him, activism meant walking, or at the most, ice skating in a Currier and Ives setting. Not that he was unfamiliar with park misuse, or lacked a perspective on it. Of the 17 large public parks that he had completed with associates by 1890, he wrote, "After we have left them, they have been more or less barbarously treated, yet as they stand . . . they are a hundred years ahead of any spontaneous public demand. . . . And they have . . . a manifestly civilizing effect."

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That "civilizing effect" was pure 19th-century dogma. But aside from that small conceit, the pleasures of landscape in the 19th century were romantic and contemplative; its most admired features were "picturesque" vistas and "natural" states. Witness the popularity of countless pastoral prints. Its esthetic aim was uplift, or inspiration, and its social purpose was to provide the refreshment of the country to city dwellers, with emphasis on the poor. The park was meant to give "lungs," or "breathing space" to the metropolis.

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The 19th-century point of view about contemplative landscape pleasures—a kind of existential pastoralism — can probably not be brought back in this frenetic age in which sound and action replace thought and feeling, for that is, quite uncritically, 20th-century culture. But these are still real values, that have real contemporary uses, and they were at the heart of Olmsted's painstaking transformation of the wasteland of rocks, swamps and barren pastures of Central Park into an artful system of wooded hills, man-made lakes and gentle fields that emphasized subtle, ever-changing vistas. Civilizing, indeed. Twentieth-century barbarism is constantly eroding them.

Anyone's Olmsted interpretations are, of course, open to challenge. For profound analysis, there are scholars, such as Albert Fein, author of a splendid summary of American park design in Edgar Kaufmann Jr.'s exhibition on "The Rise of an American Architecture," author of the book "Landscape Into Cityscape," and of a just-published Olmsted biography.

In spite of this documentation, Olmsted's public profile remains surprisingly low-key. He was a Yale dropout who shipped before the mast to China, and became a scientific, gentleman farmer. He was a first-class reporter for The New York Times, with his accounts of the antebellum South published as "The Cotton Kingdom" in 1860.

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He soon decided that his, and the nation's destiny, was with the cities, not the country. For four decades he was an astute observer of the pressures and disasters of 19th-century urban growth, the confrontations of use, the lack of planning, the debasement of environment.

Most important, according to William Alex, was his role, in his 35-year involvement with New York City, as the closest thing to a master planner the city ever had.

His reports, made to the Brooklyn Park Commissioners in 1868, set forth plans for the entire region, with connecting boulevards from the Atlantic beaches to the Hudson Palisades. "Whether design of parks, parkways, urban or suburban entities," Mr. Alex writes, "Olmsted conceived of them as facets of his comprehensive metropolitan ideal."

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Nor was this just formal, physical planning, although Olmsted believed in beautiful cities. Its premise was social —the dispersal of population, the availability of open space and recreation, replanning of neighborhoods, the relationship of work and home.

The totality of the city, its functions and its betterment, were never out of his mind. He did not reject the city. Or cry its doom. He was, in fact, as much the father of American city planning as of the public park. Sabotage at the Capitol would be a peculiar way to honor one of America's great men.

Frederick Law Olmsted, 1822-1903
"Celebrating the Sesquicentennial of a man and a vision realized"