

All That Glitters: Planning in Newport in the Gilded Age

From *Proposed Improvements for Newport: A Report Prepared for the Newport Improvement Association* by Frederick Law Olmsted

Excerpted by Monica Allard Cox

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., whose father founded landscape architecture and masterminded Central Park, has been called "the intellectual leader of the American city planning movement in the early twentieth century." He created the first professional curriculum in landscape architecture in the United States at Harvard in 1900, and helped found the National Parks Service. The following has been excerpted and edited from his 1913 report, "Proposed Improvements for Newport."

GENERAL REPORT

There is much that is sordid and shabby and ugly in Newport; there is much that seems vulgarly ostentatious; there is also a great deal that is charming.

The scenery of Newport is of two kinds ... the scenery of distant views and of open water [and] the other kind of scenery is that to be found throughout the city. It is the scenery of the streets and of the houses and gardens and other things along the streets. It is the scenery which most continuously and intimately affects the lives of the residents and most strongly impresses the visitor.

I have tried to analyze the distinctive qualities of this street scenery of Newport in the hope of being able to make some practical suggestions for action toward perpetuating and enhancing it.

In the first place its scale is small and intimate. The roadways are narrow, sometimes to the point of great inconvenience under modern traffic conditions. The sidewalks are correspondingly narrow, sometimes to the point of disappearing altogether from at least one side of the street. The older buildings, both public and private, are also small in scale, many of them with that delicacy of detail, even in the case of very simple and technically crude detail, that is so characteristic of colonial work. Only the trees are large, and these serve as a foil to the small scale of the manmade things, and become the more impressive thereby. In solving practical problems in a practical way, instead of seizing every opportunity to make things look impressively big in scale, one would seek to keep the scale relatively small and to obtain impressiveness in other ways.

Second, even very small yards and gardens are apt to be fenced off from the street, not in such a way as to prevent the passerby from looking in, but so as to help in giving to each yard and garden a separate individuality, distinct from that of the adjacent gardens and distinct from that of the street.

Third, the forms in this street scenery are generally irregular. The streets are seldom perfectly straight or of uniform width for any considerable distance. Slight angles and subtle accidental curves abound in fences and in curbs. The buildings, even when facing directly on the sidewalk, seldom come exactly to one line. The effect is hardly ever one of disorder, but of a pleasantly picturesque and intensely interesting freedom.

Fourth, the trees along the streets are numerous, and arranged in a manner which is not usual in American cities. They rather generally overhang the

street from the front or side yards of the houses. A large part of the quality of the more agreeable Newport streets, both in the poorer quarters and in the more fashionable, depends upon the very irregular disposition of the trees, and their variation in kind and size, giving a delightful play of light and shade.

The fact that these trees are so frequently to be found growing in the side yards of houses indicates a fifth fact of considerable importance, namely, that there are generally side yards in which the trees can grow. Especially in the older parts of the city the economizing of land and crowding of houses was done mainly by making the lots shallower ... instead of narrowing the lots and crowding the sides of adjacent buildings objectionably close together.

Especially where these narrow streets are permitted and encouraged, it is desirable to add to the ordinary limitation on the percentage of the lot to be built on, a limitation requiring a definite and substantial percentage—say forty per cent—of that portion of the lot lying within forty feet of the street to be left vacant. It would make for more healthful and pleasanter housing, and would go a long way toward maintaining the unique charm of the city.

PARKS AND CERTAIN SPECIAL PROBLEMS

First of all let me point out what I believe to be those needs of the people which can and should be met by public playgrounds. How the playgrounds can best meet them can then be more easily understood. Generally speaking adequate provision for play and relaxation should be offered to every child, woman, and man in the city. Little children need an opportunity to play in sand piles or on the lawn, preferably under the watchful guidance of an attendant who keeps them out of mischief, plays with them, tells them stories, and stimulates the healthy activities of their minds and bodies. Boys and girls of larger growth and the women and men need provision for the more active games ... preferably with a swimming pool and always with the opportunity to bathe. Then there are the older and less active people who need pleasant shaded walks to stroll on, benches to rest on amid agreeable surroundings, opportunity to watch the youngsters play, and the chance to enjoy a band concert perhaps once or twice a week. Finally all the people need field or assembly houses where sanitary arrangements are kept to a high standard of cleanliness, where reading room branches of the Public Library are available, where lectures, entertainments, and dances may be held, and where indoor games may be played.

Clean, healthy recreation is thus given full play among decent surroundings instead of in the streets, and in saloons, questionable dance halls, and many other baneful establishments for the commercial exploitation of the spirit of play.

It is essential that the recreation area be so easily accessible that the small child will walk to it rather than play in the gutter, that school children will go there for their games, that tired mothers will not hesitate to seek the refreshment of a half hour's rest in the park between household duties, and that working men and women will not be barred from an evening's rest or entertainment by the effort or expense of getting to the park. Practically, this means that the local playground should be not more than a quarter or a third of a mile from the home.

SUMMARY

I submit the above as a program of improvements which I believe to be a reasonable and wise one for the City of Newport to set before itself. Some are of pressing importance as indicated and others may more reasonably be delayed; but the prosperity of the City will best be conserved, in my opinion, by arranging systematically for the ultimate execution of them all.