

**HPSS S732 Seminar: Witness Tree Project [in conjunction with FURN 2451]  
Fall 2011 - Olmsted: The Politics of Urban Public Space**

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**Office Hours:** T 1-4 p.m. & Th 10-12 a.m.  
**Class:** M 8-9:30, CB 301

**Course Philosophy**

The Witness Tree Project is a curricular initiative involving Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the National Park Service (NPS). Witness trees are long-standing trees that have “witnessed” key events, trends, and people in American history. The Project arranges for a fallen witness tree to be shipped from a national historic site to RISD, where, in a joint history seminar and furniture studio, students interpret the history the tree witnessed and make relevant objects from the tree’s wood. In addition to classroom study, the Project variously involves field trips, guest lectures, exhibitions of students’ objects, and other events that highlight the significance of material culture, landscape, and design in learning about American history. Study in the seminar will be integral to work in the furniture studio and vice versa; assignments in both courses are intended to complement one another.

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) is recognized as the founder of American landscape architecture and the nation's foremost parkmaker, responsible for the Franklin Park in Boston, Delaware Park in Buffalo, Central Park in New York, as well as the design of the influential “White City” at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. In Brookline, Olmsted established the nation's first full-scale professional office for the practice of landscape design. Students in this third year of the Witness Tree Project will be working with an historic Elm from the Olmsted property, using study of the wood and its environment to explore 19<sup>th</sup> century American urbanization, and reform. Topics will include industrialization and culture; urban development and planning; the rise of urban reform movements; class and politics in the American city; ideologies of recreation, leisure, and public space; and the professionalization of landscape design.

**The Role of the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences at RISD**

This course is offered by the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences (HPSS) at RISD. HPSS is a multidisciplinary department whose faculty members teach and conduct research in a range of fields across the humanities and social sciences, including American studies, anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The coming together of such disparate fields in one department represents the cutting-edge of scholarship and provides a unique and rich learning experience in which you may readily learn and compare traditional disciplinary approaches to understanding the world (anthropology, history, philosophy), as well as explore newer, interdisciplinary fields of knowledge (e.g. gender and sexuality, media studies, race and ethnicity). Studying in HPSS will enable you to develop your imagination and independence of thought, your ability to approach issues and problems from different viewpoints, and your communication skills --qualities integral to the creative work of any artist.

**The Role of Liberal Arts at RISD**

HPSS is one of three departments (alongside English and History of Art and Visual Culture) in RISD’s Division of Liberal Arts. At RISD, the liberal arts are integral to the process of becoming an accomplished artist or designer. Creativity depends on curiosity, empathy, and communication—a desire to explore and share an understanding about the world in which we live. In fact, the word “liberal” in

liberal arts comes from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free,” and it is meant to convey that learning about culture, history, and philosophy can liberate the mind and thus provide the foundation for truly imaginative and innovative work. Liberal Arts classes are intended to shape fundamental aspects of your vocation by instilling in you a lifelong curiosity about the world, enhancing your capacity to analyze situations and act on ideas with independence and confidence, and enabling you to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts.

## Course Requirements and Expectations

### Books

#### Available at Symposium Books:

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 978-0195133516.

Roy Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. ISBN 978-0801497513.

Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*. New York: Vintage Press, 2004. ISBN 978-0375725609.

#### Available Online:

Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of An American Farmer in England* (1852)

Frederick Law Olmsted, *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters* (1886)

### Evaluation

The following four factors will determine your final grade:

#### 1. Attendance and Participation 10%

You are required to attend all classes, no excuses. The course meets only once a week, which makes missing a class a significant gap in your learning. You may miss a class if you have to (due to illness, etc.), but it will count against you.

#### 2-4. Four analytical papers, 20% each

Papers will offer you an opportunity to assess readings, respond to fieldwork results, and synthesize your learning in the course. Descriptions will be handed out in class.

### Grading Policies

- Grades will be based on a traditional A-F scale, where “C” equals “meeting the basic requirements of the course.” Everyone starts with an assumed C and goes up or down from there as they complete the coursework. Since this is a collaborative class Dale Broholm and I will do the grading together.
- All assignments, exams, etc. not completed by the last day of class will receive an F and be factored into the final grade, unless you have made other arrangements with me.
- Plagiarism is a serious offence and will result in an automatic F for the assignment and may warrant further judicial action. Be sure that you understand what constitutes plagiarism before you begin an assignment.

## Class Meeting Schedule

NOTE: All class meetings will be in a seminar discussion format. It is understood, however, that all seminar content will function as an integral part of students' work in the studio and vice versa. Crossover discussion, mutual insight, and collaborative activity will enhance the topic outline presented here.

### I. Landscape, Culture, and Meaning

\* Written Work, due Oct. 3: Summary of Olmsted's design philosophy as revealed by three different physical places experienced on field trip (5 pages)

September 19

Opening: Olmsted's Life and Times

September 26

Field Trip to Fairsted & Franklin Park

Lauren G. Meier, "Restoring Landscape Character at Fairsted, the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site." *APT Bulletin*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1999), pp. 29-35. [JSTOR]

### II. Town and Country

Written Work: Due Oct. 17: An analysis of Olmsted's ideas about "nature" in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century America (5 pages)

October 3

Technology, Nature, and Progress

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*

**Paper #1 due**

October 10

Olmsted and Nature

Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of An American Farmer in England* (1852), Chapters 7 & 8.

Online: <http://www.archive.org/stream/walkstalksfarmer01olmsrich#page/n5/mode/2up>

Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns" (1870). Online:

<http://www.fandm.edu/dschuyle/electronic-course-materials/ams-env-280-american-landscape/public-parks-and-the-enlargement-of-towns>

### III. Urbanization and Public Space

\*Written Work, due Nov. 21: Historical assessment of *one* of the major 19<sup>th</sup>-century social, economic, and political forces with which Olmsted had to contend in realizing his urban landscape designs (5 pages)

October 17

Streets, Class, and Power

Susan G. Davis, "Parades and the Politics of Representing Class in Antebellum Philadelphia." *The Drama Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1985): 106-116. [JSTOR]

David Scobey, "Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociality in Nineteenth-Century New York." *Social History*, Vol 17, No. 2 (May 1992): 203-227. [JSTOR]

**Paper #2 due**

October 24

Case Study I: Central Park, 1858

Roy Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People* (to pg. 259; focus on Sections II and III).

October 31

Case Study II: White City, 1893

Erik Larson, *The Devil in White City*

November 7

Second Field Trip: Arnold Arboretum, Boston

November 14

Legacies of Reform: the Street and the Park

Alexander von Hoffman, "'Of Greater Lasting Consequence': Frederick Law Olmsted and the Fate of Franklin Park, Boston." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 339-350. [JSTOR]

Laura E. Baker, "Public Sites Versus Public Sights: The Progressive Response to Outdoor Advertising and the Commercialization of Public Space." *American Quarterly* Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec. 2007). [JSTOR]

#### **IV. Challenges and Continuities**

\*Final Seminar Project, due December 5: Essay to accompany final object from studio, elaborating on the object's meanings and contextualizing design decisions in light of seminar research (5 pages)

November 21

Research Workshop

***Paper #3 due***

November 28

Individual meetings; Studio still meets at 1:10 p.m.

December 5

Critique

***Paper #4 due***