

Roads Taken and Not

| BY WILLIAM DEVERELL |

TEN YEARS AGO, urban historian Greg Hise and I took landscape architect Laurie Olin to dinner in Los Angeles, a memorable evening I look back on with fondness. Armed with questions and a recorder, we interviewed Olin—a noted scholar and preservationist as well as a master of his craft—about the legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted and his sons. Laurie spoke of once being hired to go into Central Park to draw “every bridle trail, every path, every tree, every twig, every stone, every lake” near a planned upgrade of some stables and horse facilities. That experience—rendering the park in fine detail—convinced him that Central Park was probably the greatest work of art in American history. **THIS REVELATORY MOMENT PROVOKED** a bit of a wistful response from us. Greg and I were in the midst of dusting off a little-known landscape plan that the Olmsted Brothers, with Harland Bartholomew & Associates, had done in the 1920s. Los Angeles had tried for years to bring the Olmsteds—first Olmsted, Sr., and then his sons—to southern California. A consortium of civic-minded elites—Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and other Hollywood luminaries working with the chamber of commerce—finally enticed the firm (then run by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.) to come west and think big about landscape planning in the vast, eclectic spaces of Los Angeles County. **LOS ANGELES HAD ALREADY PROVEN** it knew how to think big. It is a tried-but-not-true statement that L.A. is an unplanned morass. Careful urban, and especially suburban, planning marks much of the region’s 20th century history, as scholars such as Hise have made clear. By the 1920s, the city had already tackled big infrastructural efforts. Los Angeles harbor came into being mostly by way of federal funding for vast dredging and breakwater operations. From there, the city moved quickly to grapple with the demands for water. First came the Los Angeles Aqueduct, a giant straw that sucked water from the Owens Valley into the Los Angeles basin a few hundred miles away. Then came the dream of doing the same with the mighty Colorado River, which came to pass in a political and engineering triumph. Greater Los Angeles indeed had a thirst. But, every bit as important, it proved capable of thinking very, very big. **THUS THE PITCH TO THE OLMSTED FIRM** made sense. What was produced, just as the Depression dawned, was a masterpiece in three parts. First, Olmsted and Harland Bartholomew thought impressively of

ways to integrate greenspace. Tying small, vernacular, out-of-the-way spaces such as playgrounds, bridle paths, and athletic fields to parks, beaches, and parkways, Olmsted envisioned a greenbelt for the entire basin. Even today the project, intricate and painstaking, is a model. But it is only one part of a triangulated vision. Not only did Olmsted outline how to pay for the plan, he also sketched how to govern it. **THAT LAST PIECE OF THE PUZZLE**, governance, became the sticking point. It’s the part that made Hise and me think wistfully as Olin spoke with reverence about Central Park. Olmsted, Jr., insisted on super-jurisdictional oversight. How else to administer something larger than vast Los Angeles County? The plan sprawled from coast to desert, crisscrossing dozens of jurisdictions. **OLMSTED’S PATRONS**, especially the chamber, had

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zero interest in ceding clout to a “super parks board” with its own funding, law enforcement, and other authorities. The chamber vociferously defended its fiefdom at the expense of Olmsted’s genius. The very organization that called for the plan killed it. **THE IRONIES ARE ALMOST AS POWERFUL** as the regrets. The Depression forever changed the balance of power in Los Angeles. The arrival of federal dollars, administrators, and programs soon ended the chamber’s reign. Had the plan’s proponents held on, it may have been possible to get the work underway through the New Deal projects that were reshaping the American West. **CENTRAL PARK AND THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WATERWORKS** were both characterized by bold vision, telling stories of significance about American ideas of cities and nature. Would there be even more to connect them, like the great work of Olmstedian art envisioned long ago for the city of Los Angeles.

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