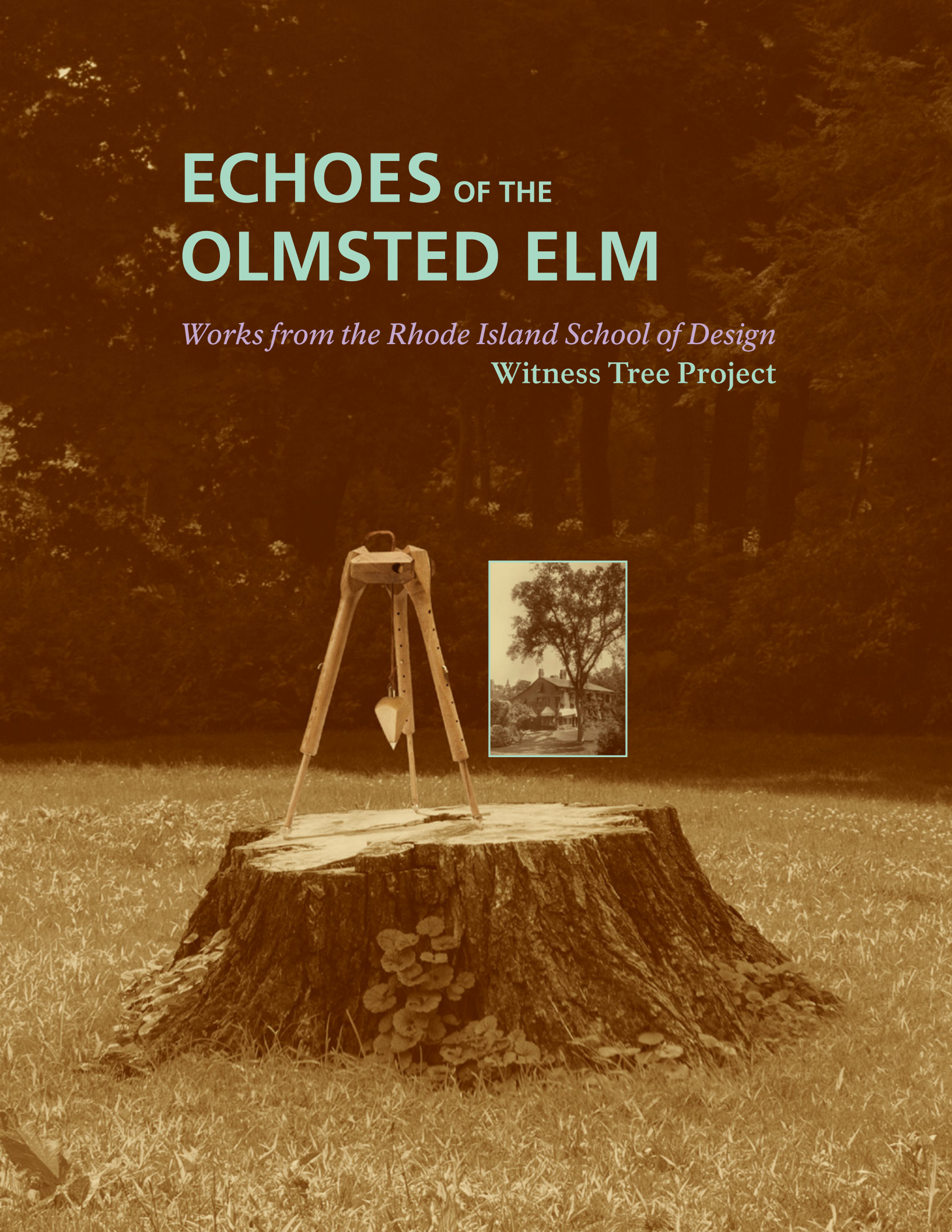
ECHOES OF THE OLMSTED ELM

Works from the Rhode Island School of Design
Witness Tree Project



ECHOES OF THE OLMSTED ELM

Works from the Rhode Island School of Design
Witness Tree Project

Frederick Law Olmsted
National Historic Site

Friends of Fairsted

Dear Visitors,

Welcome to “Echoes of the Olmsted Elm”! We are so pleased that the difficult but necessary loss of the Olmsted Elm was able to yield an educational program and artistic experience of such high caliber.

We hope you enjoy this encounter with the elm through the insights and artistry of these talented students from the Rhode Island School of Design.

Overview of the exhibit guide

The opening essays introduce the Olmsted Elm from the perspective of several who knew it well. Lasting personal and professional impacts of this important tree are conveyed in these first-hand accounts.

The essays that follow are the RISD students’ written components of their Witness Tree Project assignments. Their ideas, crafted in text and wood, express their understandings and interpretations of the three studied topics.

The images of the elm throughout the guide highlight moments in the Olmsted Elm’s long history here at Fairsted.

Acknowledgements

Echoes of the Olmsted Elm is the result of a collaborative effort between the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site and the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, and the Rhode Island School of Design, with most welcome support from the Friends of Fairsted.

Several National Park Service staff made major contributions to this effort. They include Mark Swartz, Brianne Cassetta, and Matt Griffing.

We would like to thank our RISD partners for their deeply creative contributions to commemorating the Olmsted Elm.

Myra F. Harrison

Superintendent

Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site

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Student text was lightly edited.
Photos of student work by Erik Gould.

Elm in South Lawn of Fairsted circa 1900. NPS/Olmsted Archives

I first met the elm the first time I came to the Olmsted site in the late fall of 1990. I was a recent graduate with a BA in History and had been looking for work as a high school teacher. The job market was not great, so I decided to look into the museum field. In those days you entered the site around the backside of the site and when you cleared the back fence, you were immediately struck with what might be called the "classic" view of the elm on the South Lawn. At that point, my dendrological knowledge was pretty much that I knew the difference between a tree and a shrub. Of course, once I started working at Fairsted, I entered a steep learning curve about trees in general and elms in particular.

The elm was in decent shape in 1991 when I first saw it leaf out. It certainly created a great canopy for anyone out on the South Lawn and I realized quickly that it helped to moderate the temperature of the southwest side of the house. I don't know if Olmsted would have built the Plant Room, with all its windows, if the cooling effect of the elm was not available. When I moved into the office on the floor above the Plant Room, its effects were even more pronounced and when it was removed in 2011, it became apparent that my office, which now is a conference room, would benefit greatly from the new geothermal cooling system that has since been installed.

On a more personal note, the elm was a place to relax beneath on a hot summer day. It was a tree that, perhaps because of its given name of the "Olmsted Elm", that it seemed to almost have a personality – a "treesonality"? Being the oldest piece of plant material on the grounds, it was like an anchor to the rest of the landscape. I remember when we started having some of the initial meetings about its removal that it almost seemed like we were almost discussing euthanasia, rather than cutting down a tree. Anytime I brought anyone to the site, it was always the elm that I would save for last on my tour. This included family members. In the summer of 1991 I took the last picture of my wife and in-laws beneath its branches. My father-in-law passed away later that year and when the elm came down in March of 2011 it had outlived all of them. Something not lost on me when it was removed.

Alan Banks
Supervisory Park Ranger
Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site

It was a beautiful sunny warm day in mid-April, 1986 when the Olmsted Elm and I first met. Several weeks earlier I had accepted a Gardener position, sight unseen, at the F.L. Olmsted National Historic Site. As a young, recent college graduate in plant science, I felt quite confident that I was fully capable and had the all the necessary expertise to effectively care for the property's landscape, regardless of what was there.

When I arrived at the site on that first morning my boss introduced me to the job; he casually introduced me to my responsibilities of keeping the grass mowed and leaves raked. Then, as we approached the Olmsted Elm, his tone changed, he became very serious. As we stood there beneath the tree canopy, he ominously described how caring for this tree was the most important detail of my job. While listening, I clearly remember my eyes glancing upward along the trunk to the limbs and outward to the branches and leaves. "Wow" I remember saying to myself, "this is a cool tree!"

I soon learned about the Olmsted Elm's history: how it predated Frederick Law Olmsted's purchase of the property and his decision to retain it as a focal point in the landscape; its' bouts with, and recoveries from, fungal infections, pest infestations, hurricanes, and site construction; how it had been used by the Olmsted Firm to develop new ideas in tree care practice such as field testing a mast-and-boom contraption that was later used for controlling Leopard Moths on the elms in Boston Common. The hooks, spikes, nails and other hardware remaining in the trunk and limbs reinforced the written record and photographs of how the Olmsted Firm and family interacted with the tree.

It was made quite clear to me how important the health and survival of the Elm was for preserving the qualities and intent of Olmsted's landscape design and…for my career. I carefully and regularly inspected and cared for the tree; on the constant lookout for threats of Dutch Elm Disease and other impacts that would lead to its demise; improving site and soil conditions to enhance health; and, strategically pruning weak or damaged branches. This attention did not go unnoticed by the Elm which responded well, and flourished, under such personalized care. Almost as if it were a mutually understood collaboration between me and the elm, my career kept in step with its health as I was cultivated for and promoted to positions of more responsibility.

The Elm and I maintained our relationship for over twenty-five years. While others took on the responsibility of its direct care, I often helped with correcting problems of health and deterioration. As the elm aged and more aggressive care was needed, I continued to assist with monitoring its condition and recommending appropriate treatments to sustain health and maintain its dignity as a recognized icon in a nationally significant landscape.

When the stability of the tree diminished to the point that limb failure threatened personal and property damage, I reluctantly accepted that it was time for removal. The morning that it was scheduled to be taken down I went to the Elm to say goodbye. I stood very much in the same spot as the day we first met. I studied its characteristics, touched and traced the bark with my hands, took note of the remnant hardware left in place by the Olmsteds, marveled at the size of the trunk, heavy limbs and arching branches. I took it all in for the last time. As the arborists began approaching the tree to begin their work, I said goodbye and turned to leave. I turned back, one last look, and said "Thank You."

Charlie Pepper
Senior Project Manager
Preservation Maintenance & Education
Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation

I have devoted much of my adult life to the study and preservation of the historic American landscape, and the Olmsted Elm at Fairsted has contributed greatly to my understanding and appreciation of the complex interrelationship between humans and the natural environment, and the art and science of landscape design. Frederick Law Olmsted has taught all students of landscape architecture that design is as much about retention and appreciation of an existing site, as it is about the addition of new features. The Olmsted Elm is a case in point – retained by FLO as a relic of the earlier farmstead, which in turn formed the nexus around which his new landscape took shape.

Nearly a century after Olmsted settled on Warren Street, I took the plant materials course at Harvard Graduate School of Design from Joe Hudak, who at that time was still partner in Olmsted Associates and often referred to the Olmsted Homestead in his lectures about trees, shrubs, and vines. I had visited the site on many occasions in the 1980s and had greatly appreciated the magnificence of this stately tree, but in 1991 our worlds literally collided (the tree and me that is) when I came to the Olmsted NHS to direct the restoration of the grounds. Through the next decade, I grew to appreciate Olmsted's careful decision to save this tree and I marveled at its perseverance through a century of change including the construction and de-construction of a swimming pool. In the early days of the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, Charlie Pepper led the program to propagate historically significant plant material, and the elm was a natural candidate to inaugurate that effort. It served as an important topic related to strategies for plant selection, retention, and replacement in historic landscape preservation so its contribution to the field has been noteworthy and the elm lives on in articles and the memories of the horticulturists who participated. My oldest child, born in the early days of the restoration planning, grew up running circles around the elm and climbing over the rock outcroppings at Fairsted. I like to think that these experiences shaped his appreciation of the natural and designed environment, clearly evident in many aspects of his young adult life including his critiques of college campus design.

The loss of the elm was like losing a friend and a mentor. I had advocated for many years that it be saved at all cost; that the tree was irreplaceable and the single most significant element in the Fairsted landscape. But as time, old age and disease ravaged the tree, the necessary removal of its main limbs and sparse foliage were an indication that it was in serious decline. Like all living things, it was time to say good-bye. I am grateful that through the Witness Tree Project, RISD students have created beauty out of loss. But for me, the circle is not and will not be complete until the propagated elm is returned to Fairsted to grace the next century.

Lauren G. Meier
American Society of Landscape Architects
Friends of Fairsted

What I found interesting about the Olmsted Elm was that everyone who came in contact with the tree had some kind of story or connection to it. Charlie Pepper at the Olmsted Center told me about the potential of the tree being available to the Witness Tree Project. During the course of our conversation it became clear that this was a very special tree to him and many others. When I met with the NPS staff at Fairsted to introduce the Project, the significance of the tree to both the staff and neighborhood was shown in a very emotional way. The elm was clearly near and dear to many people. When the tree was cut down, the media attention, visitation by neighbors and others to say goodbye was impressive.

The sawyer, Brian Brown from Artisan Lumber was thrilled to have a chance to cut the logs. He had trained as a landscape architect and held a deep respect for Olmsted and his work. During the days I spent out at the mill observing the processing, Brian was always speaking of Olmsted's legacy, the importance of his work and the significance of this lumber in the class.

When the class made the visit to the site, I felt like the students really responded to the importance of the tree both in Olmsted's mind (how he had designed around it when he first moved to Brookline) and its place in the character of the neighborhood. I think they understood the impact of its removal and the loss that was being experienced. At the time of the visit the stump was still intact and it was interesting to watch the students engage with it, (the stump being a register of time and events, plus a direct connection the Olmsted himself).

When folks with no connection to the Project heard about the tree there was always a response. Stories told about time in Olmsted's parks, how much they loved the elm tree and felt the loss due to the disease and more. It was very surprising the impact that this one tree had on so many.

The objects that the students created were for the most part rich content relating to Olmsted the man and his work. I think that the students really embraced the assignments and seriously investigated Olmsted, his work and how the parks helped change the face of America's landscape. With the opening of the exhibition the tree's legacy will continue and I'm sure more stories will be created by the viewing audience as they connect and interpret with the objects.

Dale Broholm
Senior Critic
Department of Furniture Design

Olmsted's role as America's pre-eminent park maker was the initial inspiration for the Witness Tree Project seminar. However, as we began the semester, we very quickly came to see Olmsted as far more than that. As he encouraged people to move through his landscapes, he seemed to be constantly moving himself, from one career path to the next, until one would open up like an emerging vista. He was a park maker, but he was also a gifted ethnographer and writer, social reformer and activist, public servant and scientist. He was an elite but not an elitist. He embraced the restorative effects of Nature but was not a Luddite. He was a sophisticated urbanite who thought like a farmer. The varied contours of his life story reveal a person restlessly searching for how to best shape a better world. It just so happens that, in his case, the shaping was sometimes literal.

The expansiveness of Olmsted's career inspired our own work. We certainly read widely: Olmsted's journalistic writings, theories of technology and nature in American literature, articles on the politics of street parades and commercial advertising, lengthy histories of Central Park and the 1893 Chicago's World's Fair. We also engage in discussion and debate about the relationship of "town" and "country," for example, or about the use of landscape design as a means to social reform, or about the appeal of Central Park versus Coney Island. While reading and writing, we immersed ourselves in Olmsted's designs: we toured Fairsted, Franklin Park, the Arnold Arboretum, and the Emerald Necklace, talked with experts at each site, and tried to experience what Olmsted intended. And, of course, all along, we worked directly with the historic wood of the Elm.

The circumstance of working with the actual material of an historic tree is a powerful means for evoking the past and also for exploring historical practice. Using the Olmsted Elm as an axis of study, students learned not only about the events radiating from its location but also about how a single tree might raise questions of historical interpretation. Students knew that the elm had been revered by Olmsted and had inspired generations of visitors; their careful handling of the wood was a testament to that. However, the objects they made also reflect their own questioning and thinking--about 19th century urban life, about work and leisure, about public space in a democracy. Just as Olmsted used design as a means to advocate for a better world, the students used the Olmsted Elm to articulate their own insights about the modern built environment and its meanings. I can hardly think of a better tribute to Olmsted's legacy.

Daniel Cavicchi
Associate Professor of American Studies
Head of the Department of History

Elm in South Lawn of Fairsted, 2009. Photo by Joel Veak. NPS/Olmsted NHS

ASSIGNMENT ONE

Frederick Law Olmsted was a man of many interests and occupations. Some more successful than others. Choose one of these occupations and make an object that you think Olmsted would have wanted to have with him during the practice of the chosen occupation.

Andrea Parikh

Level

Before his famous career as a landscape architect was launched, Olmsted spent two years as superintendent of the labor force clearing land for Central Park. During this period he spent a significant amount of time working in the field getting to know the desolate and rocky terrain of the site. With this in mind, this level is meant to represent Olmsted's meticulous onsite observations and commitment to detail. Olmsted could have used the device to establish a horizontal plane when leveling earth for the creation of the first landscaped public park in the United States. The design reinterprets the common tool – usually made from aluminum or plastic – using an uncommon material, intending to provoke the viewer's thoughts about materiality and construction.

John Adams

Plumb Bob and Tripod

Among Olmsted's many professions, his work as a surveyor stood out to me because of the importance of precision tools. As a surveyor, Olmsted would have laid out a grid work in order to document key features of the landscape. To do this properly, numerous measuring devices must be utilized. Among them, a plumb line is necessary to ensure the trueness of vertical grid lines. In my plumb bob I aspired to establish a balance of round and straight features by rounding over the top and chamfering the bottom. This balance is a reference to the balance Olmsted strove to find in his environments. I also added a brass tip in order to increase the weight of the plumb and allow for a greater degree of precision, as I perceive Olmsted to have been very exacting. To hold the plumb bob and establish the plumb line, I decided to make a tripod. Traditionally plumb bobs are held by an A-frame consisting of two legs and a cross member along which markings can be made. I thought an A frame would be too cumbersome for Olmsted's active lifestyle, so I instead designed a more compact telescoping tripod. In the tripod I also incorporated round and straight elements with rotated forms and more chamfers.

Karl Sippel

Netting Shuttle

The net shuttle is a tool that cord is wound around and used to create and repair nets. The natural utility of nets would have made this tool indispensable on any ocean going voyage. From holding down cargo to creating a ladder, Frederick Law Olmsted would have inevitably utilized a net during his time as a merchant sailor and thus I feel that during his days at sea Olmsted would have wanted a net shuttle to create and maintain these valuable tools.

Tina Xu

Mortar and Pestle

Being a dry goods clerk can be a very uneventful occupation. Frederick Law Olmsted would most definitely agree with this. However, with the use of a simple tool, a repetitive, dull vendor can become a magician, a doctor, and a cook. The mortar and pestle can transform those shelves of spices and herbs into an endless number of delicious or medicinal concoctions. The act of grinding things in this small handmade mortar would be meditative and satisfying, as Olmsted would study the rings of the wood and trace them with his pestle. As well, any sort of frustrations with his unhappy days can be released in the pounding and crushing of goods. Its simple but timeless form made to fit comfortably in the hand is something Olmsted should never tire of. Considering how miserable he felt during his time on the job, this small but effective tool could have given him that daily spark of creativity and productivity he didn't yet know he longed for.

August Lehrecke

Walking Stick

In designing an object that I think Olmsted would have had use for in his extensive and varied career, I tried to narrow my scope down to something at the core of his work and philosophy. What I eventually came to was the act of walking, something that I think Olmsted was very attached to. In reading his accounts in Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England, one can glean a very analytical and observational approach in his writing. Through walking around and reflecting upon the things that he saw, Olmsted developed much of the ideas and aesthetics that he brought into his later, more recognized, works as a landscape architect. He also travelled to the south of the U.S. and published an account of his observations there. Exploration and observation seem to be things that were carried through all stages of his career. To aid him in this process, I chose to make a walking stick, something that would accompany and aid him in his leisurely observations. Something I think that is nice about Olmsted's designed landscapes is the freedom he allows you to find your own path, encouraging some exploration and contemplation. I think that Olmsted would have liked to have a reliable walking stick by his side, to lean on as he observed his surroundings.

Jonah Willcox-Healey

Box Camera

I began by finding a common element between my lifestyle and that of Frederick Law Olmsted's and ended up focusing on the role of photography. Throughout Olmsted's career photography was well as drawings were the main ways to document all the parks that he worked on. I began to research the types of cameras used back in the 1900s and came across the Kodak No 2 Box Camera. As a photographer and camera collector I had an old rusted and torn camera of this model and decided to reconstruct the camera and restore it to working condition with the aid of the Olmsted Elm. The process began by converting the dimensions and components of the paper bodied camera into wood and combining parts to make an easier constructed camera. When constructing the camera I choose to use materials that were of the same era as Olmsted to create a more authentic feel.

Samantha Anderson

Axe

As a farmer and landscape architect, Olmsted had use for a small axe in both the utilitarian and symbolic sense. My intent in shaping a handle for this tool is to describe the nature of Olmsted's relationship with the environment. An axe handle represents a tool meant for a man who manipulated the landscape- it is symbolic as a tool for landscape design and also as a tool for various jobs on a farm.

This specific handle is designed to recall the topography of the land that Olmsted was so connected to throughout his many careers, especially as a landscape architect and farmer. The curves, twists, and bends undulate under the grain, whose rings evoke topographical notation. In a poetic cycle, the wood of Olmsted's Elm is recycled into a wooden tool whose use is to modify wood.

Hilary Wang

French Curves

When trying to choose an object to construct that Olmsted would have liked to use or had with him, I was leaning towards something that would reflect his deep appreciation for nature. With that in mind, I decided to focus on the period of his life in 1857, when he became the superintendent of Central Park. I felt that a key tool that Olmsted would have benefited from during the drafting process would have been French Curves, also known as Burmester Curves after the inventor Ludwig Burmester.

I felt that the iconic S shape bends reflect the sense of having been organically calculated. The same calculated measures that Olmsted took in designing his landscapes. The French Curves represent Olmsted's obsessive perfection towards designing Central Park. The French Curves, in my mind, also reflect the lay out of Central Park, the first of many parks he designed after; which is mostly comprised of curving swatches of greenery with paths weaving through. I chose to negate the conventional negative cutouts and stuck with just circles that could act as finger grips or a hole to hook on for storage. The addition of the pouch represented the utilitarian aspect of being able to travel with them on site, or during his visits to other park sites.

Elm removal, March 30, 2011. Photo by Jean Stringham. NPS/Olmsted NHS

ASSIGNMENT TWO

Leisure activities, play, relaxation in public spaces have changed in many ways during the past century. Identify a period of time in America's past, staring with the 1850s, and create an object that reflects a form of leisure, play, recreation, etc. that would have been popular and recognizable during the selected time period.

John Adams

Longbow

Recreational archery began in England as the upper and middle classes began to develop a reverence for the traditional longbow and its rich Anglo Saxon history. The first American archery association was the United Bowmen of Philadelphia, founded in 1828. In the 1870s many archery clubs sprang up, and in 1879 eight of them formed the National Archery Association of the United States. This association was focused on target based archery. Other hunting and distance based disciplines would develop later as archery rapidly grew in popularity during the 1930s. Although the longbow was commonly used, a new American development was the laminated flatbow. While laminations were used widely in the Middle East and Asia, the flatbow is strictly American, stemming from the English longbow and English attempts to laminate exotic woods from newly claimed colonies, which due to glue technologies was widely unsuccessful in bows outside of the U.S. The flatbow differs from the longbow in that

its cross section is rectangular rather than rounded in the belly to form a "D" shape. This example uses three pieces of elm laminated with bow-makers epoxy and then tillered by hand. The tillering process involves stringing the bow, loosely at first, and pulling back the string and visually checking the bed in the limbs. Material is removed from stiff spots until both limbs bend gradually and equally. This process leads to a reliable and smooth drawing bow.

Jonah Willcox-Healey

Alpine Skis

During the early 1920s-30s, skiing began to develop in the United States on a larger scale with the first ski shop in the U.S. opening in Boston in 1926, to the first ski train in the U.S. running between Boston and Warner, New Hampshire in 1929. Skiing had been around for thousands of years dating back to rock drawings in Norway but during this time period it was finally being brought to the public in the United States, especially during the third winter Olympics being held at Lake Placid, New York in 1932.

The Olmsted firm was working around Boston right in the middle of the development of a "new" winter pastime. The Elm in Omsted's backyard was witness to this entire goings on; its wood is older than the rise of skiing and most likely older than the wood used for skis even at the time.

I found this to be an interesting connection for myself since I have grown up learning to ski on the East Coast and now have the opportunity to work with the fallen Olmsted Elm. I chose to make a pair of skis that were inspired by designs by the Nortland Ski Company, which was founded in 1911. I began by hand shaping two long blanks for the skis and the steam bending them into curved forms. Then sections of leather were attached to indicate where one would stand on the ski. If these were to become usable, a toe cleat and heal strap would then be attached to hold the foot.

Samantha Anderson

Toy Boat

Upon being prompted with the words "recreational object" my mind immediately moves to "toy." The prospect of designing not only for a purpose but for a user is enticing and motivating. Pre-design research gave me an idea of what games and objects children had for play at the turn of the century- the time when Olmsted's parks were fresh and occupied by a youth rather freely governed by the adult population. The research yielded results that were rather limited, relative to the contemporary catalogues of Toys 'R Us or F.A.O. Schwartz.

The children of wealthier families in Olmsted's time might have been gifted a Raggedy-Anne doll, Teddy Bear, or Lincoln Logs. Perhaps a Cup and Ball, Jacob's Ladder or Stick and Wheel would have been passed down to them by the previous generation. But the kids of the tenements, those who occupied the work houses, factories, orphanages, or streets, were required to invent and build their own toys. Olmsted's parks offered a space for both kinds of kids, and both kinds of toys. I found the shared preciousness and singularity of both kinds

of toys very significant. There were no masses of plastic figures or cheap alternatives to the China Doll. A child's nursery – if he had one at all – was not a 100 square foot room filled with innumerable objects like these, as in the McMansions that occupy the suburbs today.

The spirit of these toys was in accordance with their time- adventure, invention, building, entertainment, achievement. A story like Chitty-Chitty Bang Bang or Peter Pan illustrates the importance of ships to the dreams of those kids. A toy boat embodies this culture in many ways including symbolism and metaphor. My intention in my method of making was to end with a toy that might have been accessible to kids of a broad range of backgrounds in the 19th Century.

Shao-yi Chiang

Sandbox Toys

In 1886, the establishment of the Boston Sand Garden marked the important keystone for the American Playground Movement. It is the first playground in the country designed specifically for children. However, the movement did not happen in one night. Through advanced development in the understanding of education, leading reformers of the time tried to promote the idea of playing as a way to learn for children.

I want to focus on the vision of these reformers and how they saw the sand garden as a way to save the children from the effects of poverty and homelessness. Dr. Marie Zakrsewska had observed on her trip to Berlin in 1885, both rich and poor children playing in heaps of sand in public parks under the supervision of the police.

I envision that the shovel and rake I made will be shared among the poor and rich children playing in the newly built sand garden during the time.

Andrea Parikh

Decanter

The idea of the decanter boils down to ritual and wasting away the afternoon. A decanter, a symbol of leisure, often reflects the style of the person drinking from it; in this instance, someone of the 1920s middle class who valued the popular Art Deco style of lavishness – a break from the austerity and coldness of WWI. Unlike a beer barrel or other vessel, the decanter represents properness and style. The consumption of alcohol was a big question of debate for many Americans during the late 19th century. Movements by the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Industrialists, and American Temperance Society pushed to combat the influence of alcohol on families and workers in the United States, and eventually won. With the end of WWI and all of its restrictions and pressures, men were coming home and it was a time of celebration. The Roaring 20s were in full swing, and many of those who previously had little or no money had more money and more time than they ever had. Now one of the main pastimes and foreign cultural influences had recently been outlawed through the country, though this didn't stop people from participating in one of the most common activities of leisure.

August Lehrecke

Juggling Pins

In thinking about the opportunity that Olmsted gave people by providing them with a public space to do whatever they chose, I became interested in the two kinds of activities that would take place in parks. I would describe them as leisurely or active, where people would take part in either relaxing or exertive activities. I chose to make juggling pins as my object of recreation, not only because it embodies an exertive type of activity that went on in public spaces but also because of their performance aspect, which had the ability to transform a park into an arena for viewing something. The first of these kinds of public performances came in 1792 with a man named John Bill Ricketts, who performed a one man stunt show, where he would do various tricks on the back of a horse. These kinds of acts were performed in the streets, where everyone could see, in hopes of making money. Around the time that Olmsted was building Central Park these public shows were being organized into the first circuses (1840, Barnum and Bailey circus created), which moved away from the intimacy of a one-man show and more towards a larger venue. This shift directly paralleled the nation's transformation from a small pastoral society to an urbanized industrial powerhouse, a topic that Olmsted was very much interested in, and which he tried to address in creating his public space. I believe that in creating his parks, Olmsted brought back the intimacy of a performance as well as some of the intimacy of nature, allowing people a space to display themselves freely.

Tina Xu

MP3 Radio

Listening to music can be an intimate and personal experience, but it can also generate community and unite the masses. However, music that does not suit one's taste just ends up sounding like unwanted noise. The creation of parks created a public, outdoor venue for music to be amplified for all to hear, whether they liked it or not. The portable radio was equally an invention for people to bring their favorite tunes with them on their leisurely picnics, as it was a disturbance to everyone else in the park.

This object draws its form from the portable radios of the 1960's, but updates the conversation by working as speakers for one's iPhone. Musical genres and tastes are so much more diverse today that people are hesitant to share their music with the choosy public. Society has shut itself off and plugged into its iPhones and iPods, using headphones as a shield from human interaction. This iPod speaker takes the hostility and hesitation of today and breaks that silence with its vintage, 1960's form inspired by the jukebox generation.

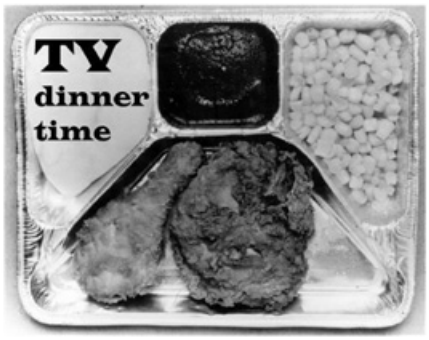
RISD students visiting Fairsted, September 2011. Photo by Matt Griffing. NPS/Olmsted NHS

ASSIGNMENT THREE

The demands of public spaces in a democratic society have been fraught with turmoil since our country's founding. Public usage of public spaces does not always conform to the expectations of society nor necessarily adhere to the laws of a given time. Pick a period and explore this issue through an object.

Taylor Colantonio

TV Tray



THE MIDCENTURY PICNIC:
1950s suburbanization + the
rise of indoor leisure

IN THE '50s,

THIS IS WHERE AMERICANS LIVED

THIS IS HOW AMERICANS SPENT LEISURE TIME

THIS IS WHAT THEY

ATE

(ON TOP OF
THESE)

AND THIS WAS
WHERE

THEY ATE IT

WHILE
WATCHING
PEOPLE
'PICNIC'
ON TV
INSTEAD OF
DOING IT

THEMSELVES.

Tina Xu

Megaphone

Frederick Law Olmsted was a man who advocated for the availability of democratic places, venues for people of all class, age, and race to converse and learn from each other. Unfortunately, he inadvertently created the platform, both physically and ideologically for citizens who want change and want their voices to be heard. The ability to generate noise evokes fear and poses a threat to the American government, causing police to view this noise as a weapon. Recent arrests and permit regulations over the use of a megaphone in public spaces, especially in the Occupy protests, are merely an attempt to silence the movement. Some see noise as a freedom; others see it as a crime. With this wavering boundary between the two, the megaphone, which bears several physical resemblances to a handgun such as its "trigger," and its "barrel" for tangible or vocal bullets to be fired, now bears social and legal resemblances to it too. This sculpture highlights both the blurring boundary between the two real objects and between First Amendment rights and "disturbance of the peace" crimes. With citizens and police enforcement both employing noise to try and gain control, the very parks Olmsted designed for unity, relaxation, and democracy have now become the arenas for a growing national noise war.

Karl Sippel

Bonus Army Box

The occupation of public space and its effects on public access have interested me for a long time. I used this opportunity to explore the issues surrounding the Bonus Army's occupation and demonstration on public land. I approached the issue from both sides of the arguement. For my object I sought to try and understand through my research and through the construction of the object the plight of the bonus marchers who were out of work and essentially homeless. I modeled my object off of a WWI ammo box, which was the war that these veterans served in. These ammo boxes often made their way home with soldiers after the war and given that many of the marchers only had with them a few minor possesions and frequently these were objects related to their service, I felt that it would have seemed like a natural choice to repurpose the ammo boxes that they carried with them in the trenches into an object to aid them in their march once again. It was designed to be carried by a single soldier and was built to last a war. I took the other side of the argument in my paper, trying to understand the negative effects these demonstrators had on D.C. during their occupation. The main issue that arose was that even though they were here to make their opinions known to the government they were doing it in a way that prevented access to public space to others. This effectively destroyed it as public space. The loss of public space is a major issue when that loss was decided by a select few individuals and not the public as a whole.

Jonah Willcox-Healy

4x5 Camera and Tripod

Often we look at a photo and long to go to that far off destination to travel and explore a distant la nd or situation that is new to us. Through the rise of photography mainly that of large format in the late 1800s to early 1900s newly explored areas such as Yellowstone and Yosemite Valley were able to be brought to the public with the emphasis of preserving these natural wonders. Without the aid of photography the vast public would not have seen the importance of preserving and learning from these natural landmarks.

The process for the camera and tripod began by figuring out a modular system for the tripod that could be used to create all the sections of the legs. The structure of the camera is built around a central beam with the ability to have both ends of the camera body pivot on multiple planes. Brass beams were then inserted into the central beam to provide an area for the set screws to push against. The camera is finished with a weather resistant oil and is in complete working condition.

August Lehrecke

Camera Obscura

Olmsted sought to create a contemplative intimacy between the people who visited his parks and nature. This was an idea made in light of a drastic increase in urbanization and technological advancement throughout the 19th century. With the increase in technology, people were beginning to be able to get things faster, with less work, making it possible to do more things with the time they had. This condensing of time was something that Olmsted contended with in his park designs, providing a space in which city dwellers could break away from their schedules and relax. In my object design I chose to look at this concept of condensed time through the evolution of photography, the act of transferring an image of one's surroundings on to a surface. The camera obscura was the first instrument that was able to do this. Developed in the early 17th century, it was used to help artists and astronomers to better understand their surroundings by transferring that information on to paper through tracing or just as a tool of observation.

Today, one can take a picture with relative ease, more often than not it merely acts as a means of remembering something that does not require you to make the effort to actually observe it. By making a camera that is possible to draw from, I draw attention to the amount of time one would have to spend with an image to get it on to paper, emphasizing the intimacy between the viewer and their surroundings. The more time it takes you to relate something on to a page, the more you notice the constants, you are unable to capture the fast moving pace of vehicles or people, only the slow pace of nature and the permanence of buildings. This notion of time in perspective speaks to the values that Olmsted wanted to convey in his parks, an escape from urban chaos and the fast moving pace of the city. The camera obscura speaks to a time where one had to truly look at something before they could come away with an image.

Mikyung Park

Bench

Public orders were set to educate the public on the importance of recognizing differences. People not understanding differences can cause conflicts and conflicts lead to public disorder in a public environment. To improve the social and cultural conditions, it is neccessary to work through obstacles. Public policy acts as a guideline for this to happen in proper manner.

To symbolize the role of public order in emphasizing the awareness of cultural differences, I decided to design a bench. Social and cultural conflicts come from the lack of awareness of others. The need to recognize others and willingness to compromise for better is essential in resolving conflicts. Having public order is important in order to control public spaces and controlling a public space means understanding differences. I wanted to represent the importance of awareness in social difference

in the need of cultural improvement by designing a bench that has two seats facing each other. The seating of the bench is suggestive in direction. It is directing people to sit in a certain way to evoke conversation. It is impossible for people to ignore each other's presence. The bench itself represents a controlled enviornment but it is really up to the users to utilize it well. I believe that Olmsted probably had a similar idea about how his parks should be used. He provided the open-ended environment for people but still desired to control the behaviors to guide them to the right path.