

EASTERN PARKWAY, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1870-1874; landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.

The property bounded on the north by the northern curb line of the northern side road of Eastern Parkway, on the west by the eastern side of the Plaza of Grand Army Plaza, on the south by the southern curb line of the southern side road of Eastern Parkway, and on the east by the western side of Ralph Avenue.

Landmark Site: The land containing the above described property.

On May 9, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Scenic Landmark of the Eastern Parkway and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Twenty-nine witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Eastern Parkway, one of Brooklyn's finest assets, established a new concept in urban thoroughfare. Begun in 1870 and completed in 1874,¹ it was the first of Frederick Law Olmsted's parkways to see completion. As early as 1866 Olmsted had conceived of a new kind of roadway incorporating central malls with trees, pleasure drives, walkways, and service roads in order to draw the character of Prospect Park with its attendant benefits through Brooklyn. Ocean Parkway was planned to extend from the southern entrance of the park to the sea. Eastern Parkway was to lead from a northern entrance "through the rich country lying back of Brooklyn, until it can be turned, without striking through any densely occupied ground, so as to approach the East River..."² where, it was hoped, it would cross a bridge to be linked with Central Park and eventually the Hudson's scenic Palisades. By this route from the ocean to the Palisades, Olmsted envisioned a half-day's carriage ride offering a refreshing passage through the hearts of the burgeoning cities of Brooklyn and New York. Nothing as grand as this scheme had ever before been attempted and indeed, the entire project was never carried out, but the parkway concept and its encouragement to suburban development within the bounds of the city became a recurring theme in Olmsted's attempts to fulfill the open-space needs of many American cities.

From his established vantage point as one of the country's most prominent social critics and landscape architects, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) was especially sensitive to the needs of the fast-growing cities. His travels through the South during the 1850s made clear to him the cultural and social shortcomings of a purely rural existence, and yet the relentless commercially-oriented grid of the Northern city plan proved to be incompatible with residential needs. Picturesquely planned and systematically placed parks were proposed by Olmsted as the cure for both the individual and cumulative health problems of city residents. Parks as a solution to help eliminate the overcrowding in the 19th-century city were not a new idea. In 1848 A.J. Downing, America's most popular architectural writer, publicized the extraordinary public parks of France and Germany where "all classes assemble under the shade of the same trees..."³ In the 1850s Napoleon III with the assistance of his great minister Baron Haussmann sought to improve the failing physical and moral health of the citizens of Paris by opening up broad avenues and laying out romantically-inspired public parks. Frederick Law Olmsted followed this line of thinking and throughout his career as landscape architect he planned open space in various physical forms to meet the individual requirements of each locality.

Although Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux, intended that their first open space, Central Park, should be a self-contained rural haven set apart from the surrounding architecture, they did, however, address themselves to the problem of joining the park with the surrounding streets. Rather than ignoring the street, they proposed a mall of trees to be planted between the adjacent sidewalk and roadway. This natural border served the dual purpose of blocking off the cityscape from the park views and serving as "a handsome effect" leading to the Fifth and Eighth Avenue entrances.⁴ This initial effort foreshadowed the direction which their later work was to take.

The approaches which were planned for Brooklyn's Prospect Park reflect European park and roadway developments which Olmsted had observed during his journey abroad in 1859. Boulevards designed exclusively for pedestrians date back to the 17th century in France. However, it was not until the 19th century that it became popular to join these recreational roadways to public parks. Olmsted spent two weeks in Paris and made eight trips to the newly developed Bois de Boulogne. In 1853 Napoleon III and his minister Haussmann began the transformation of this state forest into a romantically conceived public park along the lines of London's Hyde Park. Access to the park from the city was provided by a great boulevard of unprecedented width which was planned as an extension of the park and featured a central pleasure drive flanked by picturesquely landscaped lawns bordered by residential streets.⁵ In order to insure the maximum width of park along the Avenue de l'Imperatrice, as the boulevard was named, an imperial decree forbade the construction of residences within 33 feet of the bordering roadways. Olmsted stated that he was also influenced by the layout of Berlin's famed *Unter der Linden* where a system of separate roadways through a broad tree-lined mall accommodated both commercial and pleasure traffic.⁶ Olmsted's advance upon the French and German prototypes was also intended as an extension of the park itself and to convey this primary role, he termed it "parkway."

There can be little doubt that Olmsted invented the term "parkway." The designer's painstaking history of street types which appears in the 1868 Annual Report of the Commissioners of Prospect Park shows that he had thought through the subject most thoroughly and had done so to add a new category. Olmsted's very wording suggests the act of invention: "The 'Parkway' plan which we now propose advances still another step,..."⁷ This step featured tree-lined malls with a central carriage drive and flanking walks set apart from residential service roads and sidewalks. Six rows of trees on grassy strips divided the routes and created an endless *allée* of refreshment. Perhaps influenced by the French example, Olmsted reserved a 30-foot area from the sidewalk to each building front where only porches, fences, fountains and statuary could intrude on the lawn.⁸

On May 6, 1868, the New York State Legislature passed an act to widen Sackett Street from Washington Avenue to the city line (now Ralph Avenue), thus initiating the development of the Eastern Parkway. Construction on the parkway began in August of 1870 when grading contracts were awarded to seven contractors. The task of grading the parkway proved laborious as the roadbed runs roughly along a high ridge, known as the terminal moraine, left by the Ice Age. James S.T. Stranahan, President of the Park Commissioners, hinted at the difficulty of the job in 1871, describing Sackett Street as "that rugged and most forbidding of all our streets."⁹ Grading operations created a wealth of top soil which was utilized in the landscaping of the boulevards, which were planned to run parallel to the parkway. Stone from the excavation was piled up systematically along the new route, and gangs of workmen were put to work breaking up stone for gravel, paving stone, and Belgian block. By August 10, 1871, the grading along the two-and-one-half-mile stretch of parkway from Washington Avenue to the city line was completed and paving begun.

In his discussion of pavements for Central Park, Olmsted spoke of a road of "binding gravel" which if laid on a firm, well-drained foundation, was preferable for pleasure-driving.¹⁰ The Report of the Brooklyn Park Commissioners for the Years 1874-1879 published a description of "Parkways, Avenues, Streets and Roads, graded, paved and otherwise improved by the Brooklyn Park Commissioners" from 1866 to 1879. Ocean Parkway was classified specifically as a "gravel roadway," while Eastern Parkway was composed of "Macadam stone, Belgian block and cobble."¹¹ Macadam pavement was invented in England by John Loudon McAdam and consisted of a surface of small stones supported by a convex well-drained earth roadbed and rolled to a hard smooth finish. There can be little doubt that the central carriage way on the Eastern Parkway exhibited a macadam surface. In 1869 a steam road-roller had been imported from England by the Prospect Park management, and it would seem likely that it was also employed to compact the surface of the Eastern Parkway carriage drive. Belgian block fashioned from the excavated stone was used to pave the parkway's side streets and the two new boulevards. Service lanes were cobbled and the sidewalks curbed and flagged. Most of the credit for the paving of the parkway goes to Brooklyn contractor Thomas McCann who, in addition to carrying out the job, was also forced to take on the financial burden while the city debated how it would finance the project.¹²

In his attempts to define the many forms which a park might take, Olmsted described a parkway as "a shaded green ribbon" which might "be absolutely formal or strikingly picturesque, according to circumstances." Parkway "will generally be formal when they occupy confined urban spaces bounded by dominating buildings."¹³ Conforming to the established linear route of Sackett Street, Eastern Parkway was most easily handled in a formal manner. Olmsted selected elm trees to provide a picturesque canopy above the carriage road, while a variety of trees, predominantly maples, were planted along the bordering service streets. The Brooklyn nursery of John Condor was contracted to plant the elms and maples along the parkway in 1873. It is also highly likely that plant materials were supplied by the well-stocked nursery in Prospect Park.

Olmsted had envisioned the park and parkway as encouragements to prestigious residential building within the bounds of the city. As further insurance towards this trend, Olmsted also planned an extended neighborhood encompassing broad tree-lined boulevards (Douglas Street and President Street) on either side of the Eastern Parkway. Here as on the parkway itself development would be restricted to only "first class" residences, and again the buildings were required to be set back, in this case 20 feet, from the sidewalks. Traffic on these streets as on the parkway would be reduced by transforming the 70-foot city street which ran between the two rows of house lots--one facing the parkway, the other the boulevard--into a 35-foot service road where construction would be limited to stables, carriage houses and greenhouses. By relegating service traffic to these lanes, Olmsted reasoned he could safely reduce the paved street area on the boulevards from 70 feet to 40 feet and transform the additional ground into broad 50-foot tree-lined malls. The 1868 act creating Eastern Parkway authorized the creation of the two flanking boulevards by calling for the enlargement of Douglas (now St. John's) and President Streets and the reduction of Degraw (now Lincoln) and Union Streets for service roads from New York Avenue to the city line. Official topographical maps of the city streets reveal that President and Douglas Streets were, indeed, widened from New York Avenue to the 1868 city line, now Ralph Avenue. The front yard restriction did go into effect along the parkway and boulevards in 1868, but was repealed along most routes in 1903. In addition, the maps reveal that the service streets were created under the act but were widened in many places in 1907.

By proposing such an organized plan of development, the cost of which was eventually shared by the landowners and the city, the Brooklyn Park Commissioners had hoped to elevate the value of the land and to initiate "first class" residential construction in the neighborhood of the parkway. Stranahan noted that other efforts to control the quality of development had been attempted at the Pierrepont Estate in Brooklyn Heights and at the original location of Columbia College. The development along the parkway, however,

came very slowly. This delay was, no doubt, prompted by the ambiguity of title on the park's "East Side Lands" which were located at the head of the parkway. After a lengthy legal struggle, it was decided that the land which had been acquired originally for park purposes could not be sold for profit by the park commission. For forty years a pall hung over the proposed improvement of these properties until in 1910 a New York guarantee company agreed to vouch for the titles.¹⁴ When building finally took place, the restrictions which had been imposed in 1868 were only loosely applied. The rapid growth of the city and the frustration of the lengthy stalemate had created a desperate desire to see the area quickly developed. Although "first class" single-family homes were built in a few areas, most notably along President Street, and although the regulations regarding front yards and street widths were to some extent followed, a rigid control of the area's construction had proved to be impossible.

Today Eastern Parkway is divided into three roadways by two broad, tree-lined malls which offer their services to pedestrians. In this manner, the busy central thoroughfare is handsomely and efficiently separated from the slower-paced local streets. Concrete and wooden-slat park benches have been placed along the mall walkways, now shaded by a variety of trees and paved with octagonal asphalt tiles. Of the one thousand trees along the route from the Grand Army Plaza to Ralph Avenue, roughly one half are elms. Approximately twenty-five elms from the original planting can be identified by their substantial girth. The remaining trees are composed of numbers of Norway maples, silver maples, red oaks and pin oaks. Although the parkway's most prominent contemporary role is that of a major artery within the city's transportation system, the character of the original road has been maintained by the generous path it cuts through the early 20th-century neighborhoods it helped to stimulate. An assortment of architectural forms including one-and-two-family rowhouses, semi-detached residences, and free-standing mansions remain as reflections of the needs of the middle and upper-middle class professionals who first populated this area.

The formal elegance of the parkway attracted such prestigious cultural institutions as the Brooklyn Museum, the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and the Brooklyn Public Library. These establishments continue to support the area. Numerous religious institutions also chose building sites along the parkway. Among the noteworthy houses of worship stands the world center of the Lubavitcher Hasidim, an orthodox sect of Judaism with roots in the village of Lubavitch, Russia. In 1909 Henry Hudson's and Robert Fulton's memorable discoveries of the Hudson River and steamboat, respectively, were marked by grand parades and celebrations which were held in Manhattan and later restaged along Eastern Parkway. The 300th anniversary of the founding of Long Island produced another procession on the parkway in 1936. More recently, the tradition has been carried on by the annual West Indian-American Day Carnival Parade which culminates several days of unprecedented festivity and which boasts one of the largest audiences of any parade in the country.

Eastern Parkway was designed to help satisfy the open-space needs of the people of Brooklyn. With the tremendous growth of the city during the last century, these needs have, as Olmsted had predicted, clearly intensified. Over the years the width of the designer's "shaded green ribbon" has been reduced but certainly not its importance. For those citizens of Brooklyn actually living in the area or merely passing through, the green branches of the parkway elms provide the only dependable relief from the built environment of the 20th-century city.

FOOTNOTES

1. By 1874 neither the Ocean Parkway nor the four parkways under construction in Buffalo had been completed. See Brooklyn Park Commission, 12th Annual Report of the Brooklyn Park Commissioners, 1872 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Printed for the Commissioners, 1872), p.497; Report of the Brooklyn Park Commissioners, from January 1874 to December 1879 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Printed for the Commissioners, 1880), pp. 44-45; Buffalo Park Commission, 5th Annual Report of the Buffalo Park Commissioners, 1875 (Buffalo, N.Y.: Warren, Johnson & Co., Printers, 1875), pp. 17-32.

2. Albert Fein, ed., Landscape into Cityscape: Frederick Law Olmsted's Plans for a Greater New York City (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 126.
3. Andrew Jackson Downing, Rural Essays (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1854), p. 141.
4. Fein, p. 71.
5. J.M. and Brian Chapman, The Life and Times of Baron Haussmann (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957), pp. 191-192.
6. Fein, p. 158.
7. Ibid.
8. The East Parkway and Boulevards, in the City of Brooklyn (New York: Baker & Godwin, 1873), pp. 24-28.
9. 11th Annual Report of the Brooklyn Park Commissioners, 1871, p.400.
10. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Theodora Kimball, ed., Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Central Park (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1973), p.286.
11. Report of the Brooklyn Park Commissioners, 1874-1879, p. 101.
12. Ibid, p. 42.
13. Frederick Law Olmsted, "Parks, Parkways and Pleasure-Grounds," Engineering Magazine, IX(May 1895), p. 256.
14. Olmsted and Kimball, p. 185.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, natural features, planning and other features of this parkway, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Eastern Parkway has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Eastern Parkway was the first of Frederick Law Olmsted's parkways to see completion, that it was a new kind of roadway incorporating malls with trees, pleasure drives, walkways and service roads, that it was designed to draw the rural character of Prospect Park through Brooklyn, that Olmsted invented the term "parkway", that the parkway was planned as part of a designed residential neighborhood, that the formal elegance of the parkway attracted prestigious institutions, that it is the site of many important parades and festivals, and that Eastern Parkway continues to be used and enjoyed by the people of Brooklyn.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Scenic Landmark the Eastern Parkway bounded on the north by the northern curb line of the northern side road of Eastern Parkway, on the west by the eastern side of the Plaza of Grand Army Plaza, on the south by the southern curb line of the southern side road of Eastern Parkway, and on the east by the western side of Ralph Avenue Borough of Brooklyn.

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