



## Journal of the American Planning Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t782043358>

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**To cite this Article** Peterson, Jon A.(2009) 'The Birth of Organized City Planning in the United States, 1909-1910', Journal of the American Planning Association, 75: 2, 123 — 133

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/01944360802608484

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01944360802608484>

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# The Birth of Organized City Planning in the United States, 1909–1910

Jon A. Peterson

**Problem:** Why, how, and under what circumstances American planning first became an organized movement is mostly unknown to planners, as is the significance of such a development.

**Purpose:** I seek to explain why and how the first national planning organization began in 1909–1910 and to interpret this development in the context of American national and urban history and the history of the planning movement in the United States.

**Methods:** I extensively researched the origins of comprehensive city planning in the United States at the Frances Loeb Library of the Harvard Design School, other libraries of Harvard University, and in the manuscript collections of the Library of Congress.

**Results and conclusions:** I find that organized city planning in the United States was born out of a dramatic, historically significant struggle between two key figures in the early history of the city planning movement: Benjamin C. Marsh and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. Each represented different strands of Progressive Era reform. Olmsted's triumph over Marsh is a key to understanding the form and purpose of planning organization and the planning field in the United States in their formative years.

**Takeaway for practice:** Planning as a public endeavor is a contested process. Debates over the fundamental direction it should take have been present from the outset. How such debates are resolved can have far-reaching consequences for those involved at the time and for later participants influenced by the outcome. For this

The birth of a nationally organized city planning movement in the United States centered on a momentous, behind-the-scenes struggle between two major figures in the early history of that movement: Benjamin C. Marsh and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.<sup>1</sup> Both represented distinct strands of public thought within the broader sweep of Progressive Era reform. Marsh upheld social justice values. A young, feisty, idealistic executive secretary of the Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, he had made “justice to the working population” his battle cry, and with great fervor pursued the goals of a small but nationally influential band of New York City social progressives (Marsh, 1908). Olmsted embodied his era's public-minded professionalism and its reformers' hopes for better-ordered cities. Specifically, he hoped that cities would use planning to make their settings more efficient, more livable, more attractive, and, in all, less chaotic. As the namesake son of the founding father of American landscape architecture and the dominant voice of Olmsted Brothers,<sup>2</sup> the nation's premier landscape design firm, he readily grasped both the urgency and complexity of achieving these goals. At stake in 1909–1910 when the two men clashed was the future of city planning in the United States. Their struggle is the foundation story of the urban planning field; the issues raised reverberate to this day.

reason, practitioners should be familiar with the history of their own field and aware that their own decisions may have significant consequences for those who follow.

**Keywords:** Benjamin C. Marsh; Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.; National Conference on City Planning; comprehensive planning; City Beautiful

**Research support:** None

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Journal of the American Planning Association,  
Vol. 75, No. 2, Spring 2009  
DOI 10.1080/01944360802608484  
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## Early 20th-Century Urbanism

American cities had grown spectacularly during the 19th century. A once-predominantly rural society confined to the Atlantic seaboard and geared to overseas trade gave way to an industrial-urban civilization sustained by a national market economy and tied together by a railroad network stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. The surging city growth that accompanied this vast transformation occurred mostly during spurts of great prosperity, and all such growth, whether market-driven or publicly initiated, was piecemeal. No public agency, whether local, state, or national, had guided cities' growth on a unified basis to this point. Even the large-scale planning for cities' water supplies or sewerage had so far proceeded as singular projects, reflecting the fragmented nature of city making.

Despite the lack of overall planning, a highly coherent, center-dominated urbanism emerged by 1900. Unlike the automotive urbanism of the late 20th century, the rail-based modes of transportation of that era forced people, goods, and messages to converge at common locations for most high-order functions. American cities were typically organized around a vibrant core, be it a big city downtown or a busy main street; closely built residential areas and lower density suburbs spread outward from the core, serviced by streetcar lines and commuter railroads. Along the many freight railroads and navigable waterways penetrating these cities arose all sorts of factories, warehouses, and work sites, many of them jammed close to the central area.

Despite this elemental pattern, the new industrial city existed as a rough and unfinished setting, full of stressful conditions and ill-fitting parts: noisy streets, traffic bottlenecks, congested living quarters, polluted waterways, trash-filled vacant lots, and filthy riverbanks. Especially in the Northeast and the Midwest, ever-larger immigrant populations crowded into slums and ramshackle housing adjacent to inner-city factories, often in numbers sufficient to influence urban politics. Thus, in the biggest cities, where the new planning ideal emerged, mayors and councilmen, by necessity, frequently won elections by courting the immediate needs of immigrants and the ward bosses and the businesses that catered to them.

## The City Planning Movement

Yet, by 1909, partly in reaction to these conditions, a movement premised on the framing of long-range, comprehensive plans had taken root in a remarkable number of cities. Demand for city planning, as this novel approach

was called, had emerged among native-born civic elites, who upheld a tradition of custodianship toward the social order. Mostly Protestant, upper- and upper-middle class, college-educated, and active in local business and professional life and still beholden to late-Victorian social norms and genteel modes of taste, they had benefited from the new industrial urbanism, but had found its terms unsettling: the massive influx of foreigners; the slum housing; the vice districts; the palls of factory smoke; the raw ugliness of so many streets; the unsightly billboards; the webs of trolley, telegraph, and telephone wires; and their own loss of power over these conditions.

By the opening of the 20th century, the nation's civic elites could draw on two distinct streams of planned endeavor when they sought to upgrade the urban physical environment. Going back to the establishment of Central Park in New York in the 1850s, the public park movement had successfully championed the setting aside of immense tracts of land in cities as places of public refuge and scenic enjoyment. Guided by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., this movement after the Civil War had embraced the ambitious idea of building citywide systems of park space linked by tree-lined parkways. By the Progressive Era, the park system idea included everything from ornamental squares and neighborhood playgrounds to sizable athletic fields and immense scenic reservations conceived on a metropolitan scale. A second stream, civic art, entered public consciousness through the celebrated White City of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. This dream-like spectacle lingered in popular memory during the Progressive Era as an indelible image of how the central portions of American cities might be rebuilt to express public ideals and civic pride if only the task were undertaken by elite architects and artists schooled in the design of great public building ensembles and grand boulevards along classical architectural lines.

The coming together of these two streams of endeavor set the American planning movement in motion. This happened in 1901–1902 when the United States Senate authorized an update of the original 1791 plan for Washington, DC (Peterson, 1985, 2003, 2006). The McMillan Plan, as the resulting scheme is now known, not only fused civic art with citywide park planning for the first time, it also addressed other matters then at issue in the nation's capital: a gateway railroad station; sites for public monuments; slum removal; scenic preservation; playground location; and the sanitary reclamation of malarial flats. Above all, by redesigning the city's ceremonial core on an expanded scale and by employing classical architecture and baroque spatial devices with consummate skill, the makers of the plan, including Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., created a compelling example of concerted planning on a citywide basis.

The McMillan Plan drew national attention, especially among the civic elites then promoting the “City Beautiful” (Peterson, 2006). This new phrase stood for a recent movement just then gaining wide influence to upgrade the appearance of the nation’s towns and cities. City Beautiful leaders hailed the McMillan Plan as exemplifying the idea of proceeding on a comprehensive basis. This was a new, powerful, and visionary idea; piecemeal betterment was not enough.

Soon, civic groups or city officials responsive to them began to hire experts to devise reports on the overall physical improvement of their own cities. These were the City Beautiful plans, as we now call them. Conditions were ripe. The 20th century had opened on a wave of prosperity, and big projects became the order of the day. Typically, most of the pioneer reports stressed park systems and civic building ensembles, precisely the combination attempted in Washington. As in the national capital, officials often called for parkways, boulevards, playgrounds, and portal railroad stations, and increasingly, their authors tackled the nettlesome issues of transit service and traffic congestion.

From 1905 through 1909, at least 38 reports that utilized a comprehensive approach appeared, many of them quite modest, but others notably complex and sumptuously presented. Nearly all emphasized beautification. Among the pioneers, Charles Mulford Robinson, a newspaper writer turned planner, produced 18 reports, far more than any other practitioner. Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham set forth by far the boldest schemes. But apart from Robinson, landscape architects dominated the field, with John Nolen and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., setting the pace. Robinson, always a keen observer, recognized as early as 1905 that “a new and exceedingly interesting municipal movement” had commenced. “There never has been anything exactly like it before, and its recent rapid spread suggests that its development is destined to go far” (Robinson, 1905, p. 410). By 1909, when Marsh and Olmsted clashed, much indeed was at stake.

## The Social Progressive Challenge

In January, 1909, the Committee on Congestion of Population in New York announced its intention to stage “an exhibit and conference of city planning next March.” Declaring “every city needs a city plan now,” it sought “a plan for the development of Greater New York, and other American cities, along economic, hygienic and aesthetic lines; and to promote the better distribution of population throughout city, state and nation” (Editorial, 1909, p. 499). Apart from Robinson, who had joined this new group,

most City Beautiful advocates and planners had little or no inkling of what was happening. Nationally, concerns about population congestion were minor and represented only one of numerous issues prompting Progressive Era social reform. But in New York City, a vigorous campaign had emerged to address the explosive population increases then overwhelming the nation’s greatest metropolis, especially Manhattan’s Lower East Side, whose packed tenements testified to the heaviest immigration yet experienced in American history.

Progressive Era social reform was an expanding force in American life. As the 20th century opened, it was shifting from moralistic private-charitable endeavor toward organized social work and toward urging greater use of government authority and utilizing more activist tactics. For example, after 1901, child-labor reformers backed by labor unions had secured child-protective legislation in nearly a dozen states as diverse as Alabama, New York, and Wisconsin. A National Child Labor Committee, founded in 1904, had begun agitation for a federal children’s bureau (Bremner, 1956, pp. 217–218). And the Russell Sage Foundation, established in 1907, had financed the era’s most massive social investigation, the Pittsburgh Survey, which soon exposed horrific work and living conditions in the nation’s steel city (Glenn, Brandt, & Andrews, 1947, pp. 210–213).

Social reform, like city beautification, attracted many upper-class women. The most dedicated among them not only embraced the plight of immigrant families and their children as a cause but also chose to dwell among the poor in what they called settlement houses. Founded as multi-purpose neighborhood centers, settlement houses proliferated in number from 74 in 1897 to over 400 by 1910 (Davis, 1967, pp. 12–13). Social workers who lived in the slums often spoke with outrage over conditions they witnessed.

Anti-congestion reform began with Florence Kelley, a redoubtable, pragmatic socialist of great brilliance and a veteran settlement-house activist. A Marxist in her youth and the daughter of a famous Pennsylvania congressman, she had come to New York in 1899 from Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago to become general secretary of the National Consumers’ League. Already a fierce advocate of laws to limit women’s working hours and to eliminate child labor and sweatshop conditions, she lived at Lillian Wald’s Lower East Side settlement house and devoted herself to enlisting well-to-do women consumers against workplace abuse and labor exploitation.

By 1906, Kelley had lived “among the crowded abodes of working people” for 15 years. But only then did she conclude, almost as an epiphany, that the population

congestion she had long accepted as “inevitable” represented the “foundation problem” underlying the ills of immigrant life. “When people are crowded,” she came to believe, “poverty, tuberculosis, and crime arise among them” (Kelley, 1906, p. 81). Until this “evil” was eliminated, she claimed, efforts to improve housing, work conditions, and health would achieve little. This insight had far-reaching implications for the physical shaping of American cities and the center-dominated urbanism then predominant.

Kelley pursued it. In 1907, working with Mary K. Simkhovitch, head resident of Greenwich House settlement, she founded the Committee on Congestion of Population in New York (CCP). Both women were leaders within the city’s sizable and politically influential social-philanthropic community. They quickly established the CCP as a broad-based reform coalition by enlisting representatives from over two dozen organizations and establishing a 68-member advisory committee. As a first project, Kelley and Simkhovitch conceived a massive public exhibit on congestion and its ill effects. Wanting a strong male executive secretary who could represent the CCP and organize its exhibit, they recruited Benjamin C. Marsh, an extraordinary figure who soon brought the full force of New York social reform to bear upon the American planning movement, seeking to divert it from beautification into the battle against congestion.

## Benjamin C. Marsh and the First Conference

In Marsh, the CCP found an indefatigable crusader. Born in 1877 in Eski Zaghra, Bulgaria to New England Congregationalist missionaries, he had graduated from Grinnell College in 1898 and studied at the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania. He lost his first job, as secretary to the Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty, by challenging the slumlord interests of several board members who told him to “shut up or get out” (Marsh, 1953, p. 16). Soon, the CCP dispatched Marsh to Europe to study planning, especially to Germany whose cities’ land use, tax, and public housing policies suggested far greater roles for government authority than anything tried in the United States. Young and able, Marsh brought to social justice advocacy a near-religious zeal like that undergirding much Progressive Era reform, as well as the fact-finding enthusiasm so typical of social progressivism.

In March, 1908, Marsh and the CCP orchestrated a three-week exhibit on congestion attended by about 50,000 people at the American Museum of Natural History

in New York. The exhibit then traveled to Brooklyn in April and to Richmond, VA, in May for the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, 1909). Kelley and Simkhovitch brought congestion to the forefront at precisely the time when Manhattan reached its greatest residential density and when social reform was on the march nationally.

In June, 1908, the CCP executive committee formally urged New York City to establish a planning “commission . . . similar to the German Town Planning Commissions” (Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, 1908a), directing that the introduction of zoning (then called districting), the regulation of factory locations, and the increase of park and playground space all be considered. In October, the CCP recommended taxing the unearned increment on increased land values, echoing Henry George’s single tax (Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, 1908b). Marsh, having visited Europe three times by then,<sup>3</sup> strongly advocated German ideas, especially zoning, which promised to curtail high density land development and to force decentralization. The CCP trumpeted “a policy of land purchase in anticipation of future public needs,” a German technique used to control land development outside city limits (Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, 1908b).

At a time when socialism was gaining more national attention than ever before (Cooper, 1990, p. 146), the CCP leadership strongly opposed speculation and greed, manifesting a very different spirit from the polite gentility of the leaders of the City Beautiful movement. For example, E. R. A. Seligman, a Columbia University economist and CCP executive committee member, blamed “unnecessary congestion” on “unrestricted individualism” and the “unaided and unregulated sway of private competition.” German planning, he argued, would “prevent the repetition in the newer parts of the city” of the “well-nigh unbearable” conditions “in the older parts” (Seligman, 1909). In effect, the CCP attacked the centripetal forces basic to center-dominated urbanism and demanded socially engineered population redistribution along German lines as a remedy.

When the First National Conference on City Planning finally assembled, May 21–22, 1909, Marsh dominated the scheduled proceedings. In a bid for national attention and federal action, the CCP staged the meeting in Washington. Working with his wealthy and influential New York backers, especially Henry Morgenthau, a banker and Bronx land developer,<sup>4</sup> Marsh persuaded President William H. Taft to address the opening gathering, but Taft reneged due to hoarseness (Look-Ahead Move, 1909). Two cabinet secretaries presided at sessions and various congressmen had

roles. Even the powerful Speaker of the House, Joseph Cannon, spoke to the conference.<sup>5</sup>

Although Marsh might have muted his views for political purposes, he held back nothing. Just prior to the conference, he had prepared and privately published *An Introduction to City Planning*, a book that highlighted German ideas and brimmed with pointed slogans. “German city planning may be bad for the written but is very good for the human constitution,” read one. Another argued that “Taxation is Democracy’s most effective means of achieving social justice—including city Planning” (Marsh, 1909a, p. 2).

Marsh minced no words when he addressed the opening session at the Masonic Temple on a Friday evening. “Much of the planning that has heretofore been suggested” in the United States “has been a bonus to real estate and corporation interests, without regard to the welfare of the citizens,” he asserted (Marsh, 1909b, p. 61). What the United States needed was “a national constructive program for city planning” with three broad features. First, the federal government should conduct a “civic census” of “economic and industrial conditions” in American cities, especially to document “housing conditions and control of land.” Second, a vigorous campaign should publicize the “ascertained facts” to “make possible the awakening of the public interest.” Finally, “a national city-planning committee” should be formed “to stimulate action,” especially the enactment of local legislation for city planning (Marsh, 1909b, p. 61). Marsh applied the hard-hitting fact finding and publicity of social reform to planning. His call for federal support, however tepid by later standards, reflected the new impetus for social justice reform. In rhetoric and substance, Marsh defied the City Beautiful movement.

## Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Responds

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., also brought strong convictions about American planning to the conference. He had worked as a planning pioneer, but within the City Beautiful movement, and from premises sharply opposed to those of Marsh. Olmsted knew that the time was ripe for a national conference and that much was at stake. He had been raised to assume his father’s mantle, had worked for Daniel H. Burnham on the Chicago World’s Fair and with him on the McMillan Plan for Washington, DC, and had served since 1898 as landscape architect to the Boston metropolitan park system, which was the most sophisticated in the nation. He had also devised five city plans (two still underway) and had joined several national organizations that promoted civic beautification (Klaus, 2002). Thus, he

embodied the City Beautiful ideal for the emerging planning movement. Quietly, he had also become its loyal critic. The social-reformist and activist approach that Marsh and CCP had taken, however, threw his vision of the future of planning into question. His reaction would be visceral and decisive.

Unique among the pioneer planners, Olmsted already doubted the City Beautiful approach to the shaping of cities, especially its genteel aestheticism and its sublime faith in the all-knowing expert. As early as 1907, when he advised the Chamber of Commerce of Utica, NY, he cautioned that “the future of a live city cannot be clearly forecast, nor can any man pass wise judgment on all the best means of meeting its future needs” (Olmsted, 1907, p. 5). Always a realist, Olmsted in 1908 instructed Boulder, CO, that even a general plan for street extensions should not “be brought to a definite finish, like plans for a building. It is a matter of continuous growth and of a certain amount of continuous revision,” and thus required a “permanent administrative officer” (Olmsted, 1908). No other planner thought in such tempered, realistic terms at that time.

Most planning pioneers presumed that the McMillan Plan and the many local reports it inspired demonstrated the utility of a single, unitary plan (later called a master plan) for steering city development. But Olmsted, thanks to long family experience with public projects, close familiarity with how cities actually worked, and a critically skeptical temperament, saw that the planning efforts that really shaped the urban environment inhered in the myriad undertakings of many agents, especially engineers; and that deliberate, ongoing coordination of all the separate activities offered the best path to coherent outcomes. A “once-for-all plan,” as he later described it (Olmsted, 1909a; 1911a), had educational value but would not work; in practice, it could not achieve city betterment.

When Marsh contacted Olmsted in early March, 1909, seeking his support for the conference, Olmsted replied that it “might be of very great value” (Olmsted, 1909b). But he objected to holding the meeting in April on such short notice, as Marsh was then proposing, and suggested that the following fall or winter would be better. When the conference was deferred to May, Olmsted contacted Marsh to suggest that engineers be invited. As key decision makers in American cities, he felt they should be heard. Later that year, writing to John Glenn, the director of the Russell Sage Foundation, he recalled his fear “of the influence which the first conference, hastily gotten up by the Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, would have”: “I went into it only in hopes of modifying its influence” (Olmsted, 1909c).

Modify it he did. Following its Friday night opening, the conference was a one-day event. At the Saturday morning session, Olmsted presented a major address on "The Scope and Results of City Planning in Europe." He too had been abroad and he too had been impressed by the far-reaching powers exercised by German cities, especially by their commitment to better-ordered cities through planning. But he distanced himself from Marsh, making clear that "although we have an immense amount to learn from Europe, and especially from Germany, in regard to city planning, it would be very foolish for us to copy blindly what has been done there. . . . There is need for some caution lest we copy the mistakes" (Olmsted, 1909d).

Olmsted's real concern lay in the direction American planning should take. During the afternoon session, Secretary of the Interior, Richard Ballinger, presided, but when he departed early, John Nolen assumed the chair (Olmsted, 1909e). Olmsted, with his former student now at the podium, seized the opportunity. He placed before the meeting a resolution prescribing a procedure for organizing a second, follow-up conference. It asked that a committee be formed "to arrange for a more complete National Conference on City Planning and the Congestion Problem," to be held in 1910, and required this committee to submit to that conference "a well considered project of organization for developing comprehensive City Planning in America" (Olmsted, 1909e). Olmsted also insisted that this committee include representatives from six national organizations in addition to the CCP: the American Society of Civil Engineers, the American Institute of Architects, the American Society of Landscape Architects, the League of American Municipalities, the American Civic Association, and the National Conference of Charities and Corrections.<sup>6</sup> The committee, once constituted, was also empowered to add to its membership. The resolution passed.

## The Future of American Planning

This seemingly benign proposal did two things of far-reaching importance: It made comprehensive city planning the agreed-upon foundation principle of the American planning movement and it guaranteed that a wide range of organizations representing the mainstream of American urban reform and the city-making professions would determine the future direction of the conference. Initially, it proved difficult to be inclusive. The CCP named Marsh to the new committee immediately, and by early June the American Society of Landscape Architects named Olmsted. That summer and fall, the two men corresponded frequently. Both encountered difficulties obtaining representatives

from the other bodies. The engineers did not send one, for example, nor did two other organizations. The resolution authorizing the committee also invited a list of the 28 prominent individuals who had called for the original conference to participate again in 1910, but an October effort to draft at least five people from this list failed (Marsh, 1909c).

By early November, the committee (by then called the executive committee) had taken shape. In addition to Marsh and Olmsted, it included Clinton Rogers Woodruff representing the American Civic Association; Charles Mulford Robinson;<sup>7</sup> Allen D. Albert, Jr., editor of the *Washington Times*; and Henry Morgenthau, the key financial backer of the CCP. Frederick L. Ford, the city engineer of Hartford, CT, chaired the group (National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion, 1910, p. vi). Ford, who also led his city's municipal art society, had voiced sympathy for Marsh's viewpoint at the 1909 conference. He may have been someone that both Marsh and Olmsted could accept as chair. Finally, in late October, the American Institute of Architects chose its delegate, Grosvenor Atterbury.

Atterbury altered the voting balance in Olmsted's favor. He was collaborating with Olmsted on the design of Forest Hills Gardens in the Borough of Queens in New York, a demonstration of improved subdivision design. Early in 1909, he had confided to Olmsted that he had joined the CCP leadership "in hopes of using some little influence toward conservative action" (Atterbury, 1909). When the executive committee met on November 4, only three members showed up: Atterbury for the first time, Olmsted, and Marsh. At this meeting they named Olmsted to head a committee to arrange the next conference.<sup>8</sup> Marsh did not join this group.

Olmsted seized this opportunity to shape the future of organized American planning. Appealing to John Glenn at the Russell Sage Foundation in early December, he recalled his anxieties about the first conference and asked for funds to hire someone to organize the next. The value of the forthcoming meeting, he argued, would depend on whether "Mr. Marsh or a saner person" made the arrangements. He wanted "to relieve the conference of the danger to which it will be subjected by the well-intentioned Mr. Marsh if he is not forestalled" (Olmsted, 1909c). Glenn provided the funds, and after a rapid search, chiefly in Boston, Olmsted chose Flavel Shurtleff to organize the conference. "He is a Harvard man, A.B. 1901, LL. B. 1906," he told Glenn, and noted that he came highly recommended for his research skills (Olmsted, 1909g). Shurtleff soon accepted, becoming the de facto secretary to the conference and Olmsted's research assistant.

As these matters unfolded, Olmsted crafted a mission statement and plan of future organization, an eight-page document that he sent to Glenn in early December. "The purpose of the conference," he declared in this document, was "to bring about serious contributions to the stock of information and ideas upon which any real advance in the application of sound principles of planning to the physical development of American cities must depend." In essence, Olmsted wanted to develop city planning as a field of knowledge, not to mount a national campaign of social reform. Because deeper understanding was urgently needed, the next conference should last three days, not one day as before, and should concentrate on only "three distinct phases of City Planning," not all its aspects at once. Only "the best qualified students of the subject" should present papers, to be followed by "general discussion." A "wholly one-sided conference" as in 1909 should be avoided (Olmsted, 1909h).

## The Second Conference and Olmsted's Triumph

The Second National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion (this was the only conference to bear that full title) met in Rochester, NY, on May 2–4, 1910. Marsh attended, but Olmsted dominated the proceedings. First, he gave the keynote address, which displayed his historical grasp of what was happening in the United States and what should happen going forward. Nearly all the substantive specializations within city planning had existed since ancient times, he observed. What was new in 1910 and what justified the conference was "a growing appreciation of the close and vitally important interrelations between these varied lines of activity" and of the "profound influence" each had upon the others. Modern city planning hoped "to exercise a large control" over the "enormously complex" and "half understood forces" that shaped city development. To Olmsted this was a daunting task. "The complex unity, the appalling breadth and ramification, of real city planning is being borne in upon us as never before" (Olmsted, 1910, pp. 15–18).

He advocated, therefore, that the conference should advance city planning itself, not social welfare, not beautification, nor any other singular goal. Rather, it should illuminate "the connections which link the planning of all the diverse elements of the physical city together" and give each participant "a more intelligent understanding of the purposes and principles" at work "in the less familiar parts of the field." It should also "open the way for substantial advances in each one of the subdivisions of the field, through

better knowledge of facts, through clearer definition of purposes, and through improvements of technique" (Olmsted, 1910, p. 18). In all, this represented a novel and historically significant way of thinking. Read as a declaration, Olmsted's address marks the birth of American city planning as a field of public endeavor.

Olmsted persuaded the Rochester meeting to adopt his vision of conference organization. Essentially, he wanted "a very simple organization for continuing these conferences" (Report of the Committee on Future Organization, 1910).<sup>9</sup> He opposed as premature the creation of an "independent full-fledged association" with "a statement of objects heading a formal constitution and by-laws." That sort of body would only rival already "existing organizations of not entirely dissimilar aims," such as the American Civic Association, the American Society of Municipal Improvements, the Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, and the American Institute of Architects—all of them already "active from their several viewpoints." The conference, therefore, should simply be "a common forum for discussion and study of the subject from *all* these points of view, an impartial, humble, and colorless instrument for assisting in the search for truth," which the participants could then adapt to their own purposes. This was consistent with Olmsted's strong convictions that the field was too new and too complex for any one person or single perspective to encompass.

Olmsted's approach also recognized the fact that the new field still existed only as an idea. It had no literature and no publications of its own apart from reports written for various towns and cities by the pioneers. Its participants had little personal knowledge of one another, much less ongoing contact. Planning education had barely begun.<sup>10</sup> Although the Russell Sage Foundation had financed the first two conferences, Olmsted also knew that this support would not continue much longer. These circumstances reinforced his belief that an annual forum, structured as a low-cost, flexible, open-ended institution, would establish a realistic foundation on which to build.

## Outcomes

Olmsted did far more than launch the conference. He dominated its leadership so completely that he must be viewed as the father of organized city planning in the United States and the founder of its emphasis on achieving better-ordered cities. How he displaced Marsh and the CCP cannot be fully reconstructed, but two meetings of a new group that took place shortly after the conference demonstrate his success. This general committee first met

on May 19, 1910, in New York and consisted of the existing executive committee augmented by Mary K. Simkhovitch and two engineers, Nelson P. Lewis, Chief Engineer of the New York City Board of Estimate and Apportionment, and John W. Shirley, Chief Engineer of the Baltimore Topographical Survey (General Committee, 1910).<sup>11</sup> These last two members reflected Olmsted's desire to draw the engineering profession into planning. Their presence gave him control of the meeting.

With both Marsh and Simkhovitch in attendance, Lewis, despite being a newcomer, nominated Frederick L. Ford to continue as chairman, but Ford withdrew. Lewis then nominated Olmsted as chairman. No sooner was Olmsted elected, than Atterbury nominated Lewis as vice chairman; and no sooner was Lewis elected, than Lewis nominated Shurtleff as secretary (General Committee, 1910). Swiftly and decisively, Marsh was cut out of any leadership role. At the same meeting, the general committee established four substantive subcommittees, each geared to distinct subareas within planning to be discussed at future conferences, and voted that the chair of each subcommittee become an ex-officio member of a revamped executive committee. This rule brought Andrew Wright Crawford, city solicitor for Philadelphia and a vocal opponent of Marsh's viewpoint during the 1909 conference, into the executive circle.

At the second and final general committee meeting, held June 2, three more individuals sympathetic to Olmsted participated: H. C. Wright of the Russell Sage Foundation, Lawrence Veiller, chair of the newly established National Housing Association, and John Nolen. This meeting created three more substantive subcommittees, thereby completing the committee system.<sup>12</sup> It also authorized Olmsted, as chair, to add members to the executive committee as he saw fit (General committee, 1910).

What is striking about these developments, when examined in terms of the rivalry between Olmsted and Marsh, is the thoroughness of Olmsted's triumph. None of the new subcommittees addressed congestion per se; Marsh sat on none of them; and, after the June meeting, the revamped executive committee led by Olmsted ran the conference, aided by Shurtleff who had formally replaced Marsh as secretary. Furthermore, several of the subcommittee chairs were known opponents of Marsh's views. In addition to Crawford, Lawrence Veiller, then the dominant figure in the American housing movement and the principal author of the 1901 tenement housing code in New York City, had scorned Marsh's concept of congestion as a true cause of urban ills at the 1910 conference (Veiller, 1910, pp. 77–79). No love was lost, as Marsh had previously condemned Veiller's 1901 housing code for its "subservience to real estate rights" (Marsh, 1909a, p. 29).

As if Olmsted's hold on conference organization were not already tight enough, the June 2 meeting authorized him to add members to the general committee so as to "secure a proper representation of all the various organizations that may be, or ought to be, interested in City Planning" (General Committee, 1910). This made Olmsted's control complete. In fact, after June 2, the general committee ceased to have any real role, and membership in it became strictly honorific. But Olmsted had the power, should it be needed, to squelch any opposition mounted through that channel. Finally, in September, the executive committee dropped the word "congestion" from the conference title over the vigorous objection of Mary K. Simkhovitch (Executive Committee, 1910).

Precisely how Marsh and the CCP responded to these developments is unknown. Simkhovitch's futile effort to keep "congestion" in the conference title reveals her anger and disappointment. An earlier glimpse of the tensions between Olmsted and Marsh appears in their correspondence with each other during the summer and fall of 1909. The letters reveal so much eagerness by Marsh to press ahead that Olmsted rebuked him for violating the 1909 conference resolution they were trying to carry out (Olmsted, 1909f).<sup>13</sup> More importantly, Marsh labored on many fronts among New York housing reformers in these years (Kantor, 1974, p. 426). In May, 1910, just as the planning conference expelled him from its leadership, one such effort bore fruit; the New York Board of Aldermen created a City Commission on Congestion of Population and named Marsh its secretary. This alarmed his New York backers, who feared that his repeated calls for higher taxes on unimproved land might actually be realized. Henry Morgenthau, unable to dissuade Marsh from these views, cut his support and kicked the CCP out of the office space he had provided (Marsh, 1953, p. 29). By 1912, Marsh departed for the Balkan warfront as a newspaper correspondent, never to return to planning.<sup>14</sup> Later, he settled down in Washington, DC, as a lifelong "lobbyist for the people," often testifying before Congress as a self-appointed champion of a more socialized democracy, a forceful but unheeded spokesman for the Progressive Era social conscience (Marsh, 1953).

## Shaping the New Field

With his power fully established, Olmsted devoted considerable energy to shaping the planning field as a technical art. Working closely with Flavel Shurtleff, he launched a major study of the legal basis for planning in the United States. Published in 1914 as *Carrying out the City Plan* (Shurtleff & Olmsted, 1914), it was the first of a

long chain of such works. He had less success achieving his goal of translating and disseminating German works on planning by Josef Stübben. He did correspond with Werner Hegemann to gain a better understanding of German planning (Collins, 2005, pp. 25–26), and encouraged foreign participation at the annual conference, though guests like the English planner, Thomas Adams, faulted Americans for excluding social welfare and housing policy from the conference program. Some socially progressive conferees reacted angrily to Olmsted's ouster of March, but he weathered their displeasure.

At the 1911 conference, Olmsted justified the organization's new title, "National Conference on City Planning," arguing that it better expressed "the breadth and unity of the subject with which we have to deal" (Olmsted, 1911b, p. 4) than before. At the same meeting he set forth his now matured conception of comprehensive planning as a process rather than simply the creation of finished plans. "A city plan," he declared, did not mean a "fixed record upon paper of a desire by some group of individuals prescribing, out of their wisdom and authority, where and how the most important changes and improvements in the physical layout of the city are to be made." Rather, it must be conceived as a "piece of administrative machinery for preparing, and keeping constantly up to date, a unified forecast and definition of all the important changes, additions and extensions of the physical equipment and arrangement of the city" consistent with sound judgment and with a view to avoiding both "wasteful action" and "wasteful inaction" (Olmsted, 1911b, p. 12). Planning, so conceived, required continuous administrative oversight over all efforts to better the physical city. Nelson P. Lewis, himself a veteran overseer of city development, agreed.

The planning field paid a price for Olmsted's victory. He designed an open-ended conference so that participants could investigate various aspects of planning over a series of meetings and publish the results in the conference proceedings. Implicitly, he also committed the new organization to planning as the art of the possible rather than to planning as the expression of a new urban vision or as a challenge to the root urban pattern of his era. In attacking congestion, Marsh and the CCP assaulted center-dominated urbanism itself and fought for a more decentralized city; ironically, it was of course automobiles that eventually brought about this outcome.<sup>15</sup> Olmsted and the organization he shaped, by contrast, accepted center-dominated urbanism but focused on its wastefulness and inefficiency. He aimed for a better-ordered, more livable city, but not a socially reconfigured one. Mainstream planning of this sort, though reformist, worked with established powers; unlike Marsh and the CCP, it did not challenge property

interests by proposing land taxes or other radical ideas inspired by foreign models. Nor did it give priority to social welfare and redistributive justice. Critics of mainstream American planning have never forgotten this.

Finally, it should be noted that Olmsted, for all his tenacity, self-discipline, and brilliance, failed to convince the movement he led to adopt his process-based approach to planning. Instead, the City Beautiful method of devising expertly crafted comprehensive plans (or master plans as they were later called) remained the dominant approach, despite his best efforts. Indeed, Olmsted's successors eventually forgot what he had proposed. Not until 1941 did Robert A. Walker revive the concept of planning as a process in his now classic work, *The Planning Function in Urban Government*, finally convincing the field of its importance. Thus, Olmsted's greatest achievement was the creation of the first organization for advancing city planning expertise in the United States. That he was also the first to conceive and institute city planning as a sustainable field of public endeavor adds to the significance of his accomplishment and of his victory over Benjamin Marsh.

#### Notes

1. This article is adapted from Peterson (2003). I document all quotations from that work and any information not referenced in that work.
2. The records of the Olmsted Brothers firm reached the Library of Congress by way of the Olmsted Associates, a successor firm formed in 1961.
3. Marsh travelled to Europe in 1903 "to study methods of caring for ordinary tramps" (Marsh, 1953, p. 13) and in 1907 and 1908 to study city planning for the CCP.
4. Henry Morgenthau contributed heavily to Woodrow Wilson's campaign in 1912, served as Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1913 to 1916, and drew world attention to the Armenian massacres. For Morgenthau's housing reform interests, see Schwartz, 1993, pp. 14–19.
5. No attendance record for the sessions has been found, although a news clipping names 88 individuals who attended the conference banquet at the Hotel Raleigh (*City Planning Conference Ends*, 1909).
6. For a copy of the original resolution, which includes the American Society of Civil Engineers among the groups invited to send representatives to the committee, see Olmsted's letter to Charles Moore (Olmsted, 1909e). The resolution as published in the proceedings of the 1910 conference omits the engineering society for unexplained reasons.
7. Woodruff wanted Robinson and the executive committee acceded. Robinson thus did not represent any specific organization (Olmsted, 1909f).
8. The Committee on Program officially included Olmsted as chair, Grosvenor Atterbury, and Allen D. Albert, Jr., as members, and Frederick L. Ford as an ex officio member (List of members of the executive committee to organize the Second National Conference on City Planning and Congestion, c. late-1909–early 1910). The office records of Olmsted Associates suggest that Olmsted assumed the full load of this committee.
9. The 1910 *Proceedings* do not identify the members of this committee. For evidence that the report reflects Olmsted's thinking, see Olmsted's

letter to A. Prescott Folwell in which he opposes the formation of “a new national organization” (Olmsted, 1909i).

10. In the fall of 1909, Olmsted, working with J. S. Pray at the Harvard School of Landscape Architecture, began the first course on city planning ever offered in the United States, and only two courses existed elsewhere by 1910. (Adams & Hodge, 1965).

11. The general committee was created at the 1910 conference by combining the members of the executive committee established in the fall of 1909 with 10 callers of the 1909 conference plus A. Prescott Folwell, editor of the *Municipal Journal and Engineer* (National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion, 1910, p. vi; National Conference on City Planning, 1911, p. 261). None of the 11 attended the May 19 or June 2, 1910, meetings. The 1910 conference added 12 more members, including 4 engineers, all 12 of whom became active (National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion, 1910, p. 11). Those who met on May 19 and June 2, 1910, reorganized the executive committee, which thereafter ran the conference under Olmsted’s leadership. The May 19, 1910, attendees were Atterbury, Ford (chair), Lewis, Marsh, Olmsted, Simkhovitch, and Shirley. The June 2 attendees were Crawford, Lewis, Marsh, Nolen, Olmsted (chair), Robinson, Simkhovitch, Woodruff, Wright, and Veiller.

12. On May 19, 1910, the general committee established committees on “traction lines, railroads, and docks,” on “street planning,” on “location of public grounds and buildings,” and on “legal and administrative methods.” The June 2, 1910, meeting created committees on “taxation,” on “buildings in relation to street and site” and on “municipal real estate policies” (Meeting of the General Committee, 1910).

13. For example, on October 30, 1909, Olmsted rebuked Marsh for trying to add names to the executive committee, stating that “neither your personal opinion or my personal opinion carries with it the authority to act in the matter without consultation of the other members” (Olmsted, 1909j). Marsh replied, November 2, saying “I *did not* act without talking to other members” (Marsh, 1909d). Olmsted in this exchange was stern and accusatory; Marsh responded politely but firmly.

14. Marsh did not participate in the national conference after 1910 but remained on the roster of the general committee through the 1913 meetings.

15. In New York City, the building of the dual subway system in 1915–1920 played the key role in decentralization. See Derrick, 2001, pp. 231–268.

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