PRIVATE POWER, PUBLIC SPACE

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"When I heard this report first explained by these two distinguished planners, Messrs. Olmsted and Bartholomew, I was immediately sold on it."

Oscar Mueller, Los Angeles attorney, 1929

On March 16, 1930, the *Los Angeles Examiner* and *Los Angeles Times* alerted readers to a "gigantic county park and beach plan" that the Chamber of Commerce had unveiled the previous evening.[1] The Chamber's public presentation, the prominent newspaper coverage, and the corresponding sense of import were consistent with previous initiatives designed to shape civic opinion and generate support for municipal investment in infrastructure and improvements. This particular event was timed with the publication of a 178-page, clothbound document, *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*. The authors of record were principals in the landscape architecture and city planning firms Olmsted Brothers in Brookline, Massachusetts, and Harland Bartholomew and Associates, of St. Louis.

In their authoritative study, these prominent consultants marshall diagrams, plans, and spare prose to set out a system of neighborhood playgrounds and local parks linked to regional "reservations" along the Pacific coastline and interspersed across the surrounding foothills, mountains, and desert. It was a bold vision, encompassing an area of more than 1,500 square miles stretching from the arid Antelope Valley in the north to the harbor in Long Beach, from the famed beaches of Malibu out to Riverside County. The authors and their cartographers played up the heroic scale. Large-format, color maps fold out of the report to convey how this expansive region with

its diverse physiography and broad array of land uses should, or must, be understood as a self-evident unit for analysis, governance, and the exercise of the planners' imagination. Strategically clustered charts and tables tell a complementary story of administration, finance, and policy. This pragmatic account is sketched out with economy and poise in the executive summary. Interested readers could turn to the appendices for sample legislation, a legal opinion on land rights along California beaches, and a table outlining comparable administrative powers, funding mechanisms, and the structure of programs in other metropolitan areas. The report's breadth and attention to detail combined with the authors' insight into the vicissitudes of the planning process sets this document apart from the majority of such studies produced at that time as well as much of the comparable work produced during the intervening seven decades.

Three years in the making, *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches* was the product of a self-proclaimed "citizens' committee" composed primarily of Chamber of Commerce members and their associates, a diverse group of movers and shakers with representatives from a cross-section of local manufacturing and industry, the financial sector, real estate, and commerce. Membership was by subscription and the funds raised were used to finance a study of publicly-owned playgrounds, parks, and beaches. Committee members rightly viewed this survey as the first step toward identifying future needs, designing a county-wide system, and establishing guidelines for implementation.

To achieve these objectives, Chamber members approved hiring what they considered to be the "best brains in the United States."[2] Beginning in 1927, staff and local affiliates associated with the Olmsted and Bartholomew offices and their technical advisors undertook an exhaustive survey of existing conditions, assayed the relevant local studies, conducted comparative assessments of similar proposals for other metropolitan areas, produced four drafts, and billed nearly $80,000 for their services. The dominant tone of the document they produced and the Chamber's public announcement was one of urgency. The executive committee's letter of transmittal declared that the "situation revealed by the report is so disquieting as to make it highly expedient to impress upon the public . . . the present crisis in the welfare of Los Angeles and the surrounding region."[3]

The crisis they defined was one brought on, in part, by the Chamber and other boosters' success at attracting visitors and increasing

Figure 1. Chutes Park, a thirty-five acre site at the southwest corner of Main and Washington was first developed in the late 1870s as Washington Gardens. Over time, it was transformed into an urban pleasure ground, of a type found in most American cities, featuring dancing and variety shows, amusement rides, and the consumption of alcohol and tobacco. Reformers imagined city parks and playgrounds as a substitute for commercial leisure, a place for contemplation and supervised recreation. In this photograph from 1905, children are playing on equipment without supervision in the shadow of the "chutes" (a thrill ride that required a fare) in close proximity to vendors of draft beer. In their report, Olmsted and Bartholomew classify amusement zones as sites for commercial exploitation that "corral the crowd" and are "on the whole distinctly deleterious in character."

numbers of new residents to the Southland. More people meant the county would become "less and less attractive, less and less wholesome . . . the growth of the region will tend to strangle itself." As the committee and its consultants emphasized repeatedly, Los Angeles County had far fewer acres devoted to playgrounds and parks relative to other metropolitan areas and the ratio of recreation space to residents fell well below national standards. Bridging this shortfall would become increasingly difficult as more people came to the region and additional land was developed for residences, business, and industry. At the very least, a shortage of beaches and scenic mountain retreats foretold a crisis for the tourist economy. Just as critically, committee members viewed parks and playgrounds as a means to improve health, reduce delinquency, and promote citizenship in the city's "congested districts" (figures 1, 2, and 3). Insuring existing recreational amenities

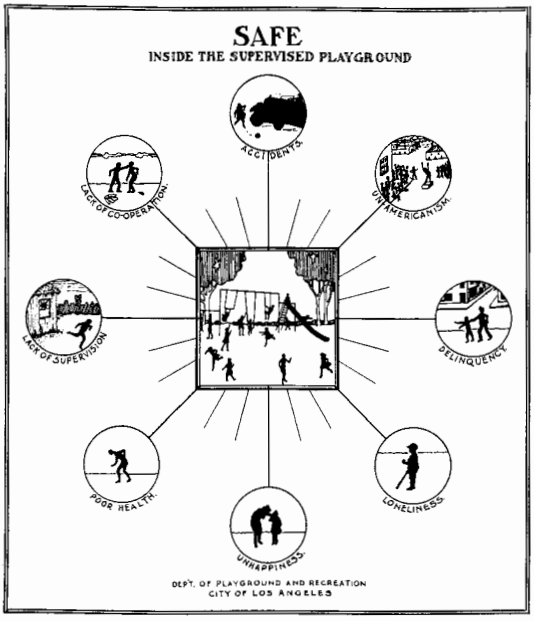

Figure 2. For members of the city's Playground Department, supervised play areas were opportune sites for stimulating right ideals and acculturating youth into the norms of American society. In playgrounds outfitted with the proper apparatus and under the watchful eyes of trained staff, the children of immigrants might be transformed into citizens. According to the commissioners' 1908–10 *Annual Report*, "This is the very essence of democracy. For to know how to associate, how to co-operate with one's fellows is the foundation of our national form of government."

against encroachment and setting aside adequate land where it was needed most for active play and leisure were the solution. Now was the time to act. Suitable sites were becoming ever more scarce and rising property values meant that acquiring this land would become more difficult in the future.[4]

Despite the immoderate pleas for urgency, the report garnered almost no public attention. The response, in truth, was a resounding silence. There were no follow-up stories in the local papers, nor was there discussion of the plan and its publication in the official minutes of city or county agencies and committees such as the Regional Planning Commission, the Los Angeles Parks Department, and the city's Playground and Recreation Department. Each would have been affected directly by the proposal. If the recommendations had

Figure 3. In their report, Olmsted and Bartholomew call for neighborhood-based recreation facilities. Ideally these centers would contain parklike areas for "mental refreshment," a field house and swimming pool, and club rooms or similar structures for community use. The Board of Playground Commissioners (founded in 1904) had established a series of neighborhood playgrounds, initially in the city's Second, Seventh, and Eighth wards (the "congested districts" running along the west side of the Los Angeles River) and then additional sites in outlying areas such as El Sereno (see figure 18). The Apablasa Playground, completed in 1927, the year this photograph was taken, was located on land donated to the city by the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. The site, in the center of Chinatown, had previously been used for stables.

been implemented, the latter two faced consolidation and perhaps elimination in lieu of a new, countywide parks commission. No mention of the report or its findings appear in the bulletins of the Los Angeles City Club or the Municipal League, groups of businessmen and professionals whose members prided themselves on their activism and close attention to policy, planning, and local politics. A search of national publications whose purview encompassed the domains of landscape architecture, urban planning, city design, and public administration finds no mention of the Olmsted-Bartholomew study despite the prominence of both firms in these fields. The report is not even noted in a special May 1931 issue of *Western City* devoted exclusively to urban parks and recreation despite a lead essay on county facilities for Los Angeles penned by Pasadena's superintendent of parks.[5]

Given the report's anemic reception, it is reasonable to ask: Why bother to look at it now? What can be gained through close study of

a failed planning document? The black hole into which *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches* disappeared was so vast it did not even receive the dismissive sobriquet "utopian," a customary response to ambitious, large-scale plans. (Keep in mind that later generations often pluck these plans from the dustbin and reify them as relic reminders of what could have been.)

The question can be posed another way. Suppose you were to visit Los Angeles and head out, reprint in hand, intent on discovering the Olmsted-Bartholomew legacy. Where would you begin? What route might you travel? Toward which destinations? If you travel the surface streets across the basin you are traversing infrastructure put in place along lines first sketched out by the Olmsted and Bartholomew offices (with consultant Charles Cheney) in 1924 as the *Major Traffic Street Plan*. This system of regular north-south, east-west boulevards provides access to a series of sites whose basic design can be traced to the Olmsted office. These range in scale, scope of involvement, and degree of integrity relative to first intention from a schematic diagram for the eventual pleasure boat harbor at Marina del Rey, to consultation on the layout and planting scheme for Torrance and Leimert Park, to the design and implementation of a large-scale community plan at Palos Verdes Estates. You will note how the physical build along major boulevards such as Western, Vermont, and Crenshaw and the experience of traveling through these sections of the region differs from the vision of landscaped parkways depicted in the 1930 report. While it is true these generously-scaled transit corridors continue to serve their primary purpose—moving people quickly and directly throughout the region—regrettably, they do not connect a series of integrated parks and recreation places designed for and used by the majority of residents in and visitors to Los Angeles County.

Another way to address these questions is to note that even though *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches* achieved limited currency at the time of publication, it has served as a touchstone for subsequent investigations of the region (a lineage we chart in this introduction). That said, we should assure readers that our interest is not in elevating this particular report to iconic stature. On the contrary, our intention is to analyze the planning process, to make transparent the somewhat shadowy and therefore suspect practice by which individuals and agencies with authority identify those "problems" the "experts" will

address, how "solutions" are generated, and the way in which the public resources necessary for implementation are accumulated and assigned. This kind of investigation requires a thorough examination of the objectives that motivated Chamber members to take action and the politics that guided their decisions, especially their decision to enlist consultants from outside Southern California. In addition, it is instructive to interpret the 1930 report for Los Angeles County in light of other studies, and we situate this document in a comparative, national context. Ultimately, it is of great utility to understand why this report did not generate an outpouring of institutional and citizen support regardless of the power and prestige embodied in the Chamber of Commerce, despite the undeniable cachet associated with the Olmsted and Bartholomew offices, and in spite of a demonstrable groundswell of opinion that there was a need for public investment in recreation facilities and parkland. This fate was not due to some intrinsic flaw in the plan, nor was it due to a lack of public will, and it certainly was not happenstance. No, what happened in this case was more deliberate, more planned. The Chamber of Commerce and its allies effectively limited circulation of the report and discouraged public discourse.

LINEAGE

In one sense, the Olmsted-Bartholomew report is of a type: it is a metropolitan or regional plan for a coordinated park and parkway system with associated urban pleasure grounds. The Olmsted firm, in particular, made its name with similar, well-known plans for New York and Brooklyn, the Boston park system, and analogous projects for Buffalo, New York; Louisville, Kentucky; Chicago's South Parks, and Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. These grand exercises sought to impose order, or at least a diagrammatic comprehensibility, on cities that contemporaries viewed as out of control. The survey was a means to this end. If the perceived shortcomings, often defined as the "problem" (or problems), could be quantified and coded, then surely a corrective could be defined and applied. This technique is scientific; a problem described is a problem solved. Of course urban "problems" have proven far more intractable and cities far more complex than these reformers imagined, and it is valuable to compare the 1930 report and subsequent planning efforts drawn from that study in light of present-day issues in Southern California.

Figures 4 and 5. Two views of Castle Rock looking north from Castellammare record the pace and character of development in coastal areas of Los Angeles County during the 1920s. In 1924 we see the "remains of the old County road," a two-lane thoroughfare graded from a narrow strip of land along the highwater zone between the breakers and the palisades.

The Olmsted-Bartholomew report for Los Angeles County spells out the dangers posed by a more than two-fold increase in population during the 1920s (from 900,000 to over 2,200,000, an average of 350 newcomers per day for ten years) and the seemingly insatiable demand for subdivided property that could be developed as house lots, business parcels, and industrial sites. The planners noted how the steady advance of urban development had crept up canyons into the mountains, followed hilltop ridges, and abutted the beaches (figures 4 and 5). Their report addresses the dangers of speculation and "injurious encroachment."[6] The focus is resolutely on systems—the robust but ultimately endangered systems of nature in the mountains, high desert, the basin, and the Pacific coastline—and the ways these might best be integrated with urban systems, especially the infrastructure necessary for an expanding metropolitan region. The plan sets out recommendations and strategies for achieving an alternative future for the county and can serve as a benchmark against which we can evaluate subsequent studies and the occasional public challenges to the politics of growth.

An image taken one year later (and a few hundred yards to the south) shows street improvements and an elevated pedestrian crossing along the waterfront as well as an initial crop of large-scale, high-price housing on winding streets leading off the coast road. The report notes that this beach has been "fenced in for the use of owners of property in Castellammare" and recommends this "quasi-public use" be encouraged and maintained. "Any private land that may exist should be publicly acquired."

This vision retains its power, and the issues that county residents grappled with then are similar to those they are facing now. Coastal development, public access to beaches, preserving wetlands, encroachment into ecologically sensitive habitats: each of these remains on the front page and front burner. In the past decade we have witnessed the ongoing controversy over plans to recast the remaining segment of the Ballona Wetlands in West Los Angeles into Playa Vista, a 1,000 acre, mixed-use development intended to provide housing for 28,000 residents and jobs for 20,000, as well as debates over the construction of luxury housing along the coastline at Bolsa Chica in northern Orange County (figure 6).[7] These and similar projects are shaping the region now and for the immediate future. Other proposals will follow. Urgency, vision, and perseverance are still called for.

As a type, the Olmsted-Bartholomew report for Los Angeles County can be placed in a lineage reaching back to Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.'s work as well as that of his associates, such as George

Figure 6. Ballona Creek is a small water course that empties into Santa Monica Bay from the west side of Los Angeles. The creek winds through present-day Culver City and West Los Angeles. The Los Angeles River once flowed through the Ballona Creek waterway, moved there by early nineteenth-century earthquake activity. Ballona Creek offered an opportunity for Olmsted and Bartholomew to, as they saw it, enhance natural settings through concerted and integrated planning. Though in a flood plain (this photograph depicts the creek following heavy rains), Ballona was at the heart of the report's west side visions. By linking coastal facilities with a parkway here, Olmsted and Bartholomew imagined "one of the great recreation features of the world." A tremendously sensitive environment, Ballona Creek has become the focus of political battles over development in recent years.

Kessler, whose plan for Kansas City is a precursor for the Los Angeles study. Although qualitatively different in approach and intention, Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan for the Chicago region and the Regional Planning Association's decade-long investigation of New York and its environs during the 1920s shared with the Olmsted-Bartholomew project structural similarities in terms of organization, project funding, and the call for rethinking metropolitan governance.

At the same time, the study that culminated in the 1930 report for Los Angeles is the last of a type, one led by a business oligarchy constituted as an informal but powerful adjunct to formal, electoral politics. These business titans understood large-scale planning as a means for achieving the city profitable.[8] During the 1920s, the federal Department of Commerce, urged on by Secretary Herbert Hoover, was in the vanguard of efforts to require cities to prepare land use plans

and adopt model enabling acts as a means toward constituting departments or commissions of planning staffed by professionals. This turn to putatively neutral experts and their ascension into the ranks of formal government at the national, state, and local levels increased dramatically during the New Deal era. The minutes of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce board of directors reveal a business vantage on the city similar to that of the Merchants and Manufacturers in Chicago, the Merchants' Association in San Francisco, and their counterparts in other cities, a complex amalgam of aesthetics, utility, and socially conservative notions of reform and uplift. The men who controlled these exclusive institutions viewed municipal recreation and the provision of beaches for the public as the performance of a civic duty. Professional consultants such as Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Harland Bartholomew shared their sense of purpose, a form of *noblesse oblige* for the professional elite. Where the business elite and these designers differed was in their assessment of how to achieve these objectives; in Los Angeles, this difference proved to be critical.

THE PARK "PROBLEM"

The Olmsted-Bartholomew report has been called a window into a forgotten City Beautiful past for the city and county of Los Angeles.[9] However, a study of the report reveals that it is something different. Los Angeles did exhibit a brief infatuation with the formal, aesthetic City Beautiful tradition in the early twentieth century. However, the 1930 plan is the product of an urban vision in which the passage through open landscape and scenic vistas plays a more prominent role than the axial clarity of Baron Haussmann's Paris, L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C., or the grand boulevards rendered for Burnham's Plan of Chicago. In the latter examples, a continuous building line along thoroughfares serves as a framing device for squares and plazas, the occasional obelisk, a civic center, or similar landmark. Yet in certain important ways, the Olmsted-Bartholomew report does represent a latter-day iteration of earlier planning and reform precepts. *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches* fits well within American urban planning traditions concerning both nature and the city. Given the institutional players involved in the creation of the 1930 plan, that history can be sketched back at least as far as the life and career of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.

This plan also fits into a specific Los Angeles context, one that even includes the Olmsted firm at a much earlier moment than the late 1920s. Much of this history and continuity has been forgotten. The kind of planning vision that produced the *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches* report of 1930 has been supplanted in the intervening seventy years by the exigencies of urban expansion in Southern California. Even the sheer breadth of this report is itself testimony to the ideals of an earlier era, one arguably more optimistic about comprehensive plans and bold projections of the future.

The early-century arena of comprehensive planning in Los Angeles, or at least ideas about such planning, belongs to progressive reformers such as settlement house founder and Methodist minister Dana Bartlett. Bartlett also saw a triad that linked aspects of regional planning into parks, playgrounds and beaches. His 1907 book, *The Better City*, fused the moral order of social uplift with the seemingly unlimited access to nature that characterized life in urban Southern California. Bartlett's ideas sprang directly from an amalgam of social gospel and social hygiene thinking, the notion that nature offered the regenerative powers to help the poor battle the temptations and vices of the increasingly congested city. Nature would do the work of social control as well: "It is a fact made clear by years of experience," Bartlett wrote, "that the fairer the city, the nearer to Nature's heart the people are brought; the more easily they are governed."[10]

Bartlett expected that Los Angeles could become the paradigmatic better city, "the world's dream of the City Beautiful."[11] Parks, ornamental and not, were critical to the plan. Bartlett figured the Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains would continue to lure the weary city-dweller in search of rejuvenation—he viewed the mountains as the perimeter and critical frame of any comprehensive landscape plan (figure 7). "No scheme for beautifying the city can be complete that does not include a comprehensive plan for a metropolitan park system."[12] Bartlett echoed planners of previous generations who imagined parks as the "lungs" of the city. (Of course boosters had long advocated the air and climate in Southern California as a palliative for those suffering from pulmonary and other diseases, and Los Angeles was known for some time as a city for those with one lung.) The recent past boded well, but demand for space would soon outstrip supply. Bartlett rehearsed the by-then familiar demographic future: by 1920 or thereabouts, greater Los Angeles would have a million in-

Figure 7. In 1914 the Los Angeles Playground Commission secured a long-term lease from the United States Forest Service for a twenty-three acre municipal camp at Seeley Flat, fifteen miles north of San Bernardino. The city piped in water from a nearby spring, constructed a cement plunge, and graded areas for tennis, croquet and other sports. In its annual report, the commission noted that the municipal camp was accessible via a "good automobile road" and that "numberless trips may be taken from this point to other beautiful places in these magnificent mountains." In the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan, Camp Seeley is classified as a "large reservation." At the time of the report, the city maintained four camp grounds, Seeley, Radford (San Bernardino National Forest), High Sierra (Inyo National Forest), and Oak Flats (Angeles National Forest).

habitants. Where were their parks? More parks were needed, great and small, ornamental and rustic, mountainous and coastal. "Some part of the ocean front should be reserved for great seaside parks," he insisted, "for all time."[13]

The distinction between highly cultivated parks and those less formally landscaped was, for Dana Bartlett and others, an important one. Parks with elaborate landscaping, though an important component to planning and beautification, must be accompanied by park space that presented "the natural condition which the city dweller longs for; parks so large that there is room for the planting of all kinds of trees in their native soils and altitudes."[14]

Dana Bartlett was no prophet—he was a civic booster imbued with

Figure 8. Established in the mid-1880s, Elysian Park was the city's largest public open space until Griffith J. Griffith gave the city Griffith Park. Covering over five hundred acres, Elysian had been planted with thousands of trees by the turn of the century. Like Griffith Park, Elysian Park was designed to offer city residents a variety of recreational opportunities, from formal plantings and carefully designed gardens to more rural retreats. Fifty thousand eucalyptus saplings were planted in the park's early years. In 1896, Angelenos voted down bonds which would have brought $100,000 to the park for upkeep and improvement. By the early years of the twentieth century, planners faced the additional challenge of factoring the automobile into an older, even European, park ideal. Olmsted and Bartholomew wished to add 420 acres of adjacent Chavez Ravine to the park; they expected that the new acreage, carved out of an existing neighborhood, might be devoted to athletic fields or a golf course.

ideals of Progressive-era and social gospel reform. Each of the component pieces of his vision fit together as an idealized whole. The assembled plan would render "the better city," an urban environment privileged with natural amenities, a rational, workable arena in which beauty and efficiency triumphed over ugliness and sloth. Bartlett called for a systematic plan to match his narrative homily, a call that would go largely unanswered for nearly two decades. He wished for a planner, an architect, or one of the newly-professionalized "city beautifiers" to come to Los Angeles and gaze across the basin from high atop one of the adjacent mountains. Inspiration would then find this man, in the form of "the mighty vision of the 'City of our Lady of

Figure 9. Early twentieth century visions of the playground included a wider set of ideas than simple recreation for children. Here the fourth and fifth grades at a school in the San Fernando Valley attend to gardening chores on their schoolyard. Such tasks, when accompanied by play (see the gym equipment in the background), were thought to be critical to encouraging proper social and physical development of the children of the city. Olmsted and Bartholomew emphasized the siting of school playgrounds with other nearby recreational facilities (see chapter IV of the report). Such multi-use features as playground gardens had, by this time, largely dropped from view.

the Angels,' with mountain, foothills, river, hilltops, seashore, parks, boulevards, happy homes—with the prodigality of nature overmantling all. When that vision should find embodiment in a definite plan, no true son of this Southland would fail to give the plan endorsement and support, even though it might cost millions to fulfill the dream."[15]

Despite the lag time between Reverend Bartlett's stirring wish and the Olmsted-Bartholomew report of 1930, such planning ideas did dovetail with on-the-ground realities and continuities in early twentieth-century Los Angeles. A city Park Commission, established in 1889, was charged with oversight of the park lands of Elysian Park, the downtown Plaza, and Central Park (now Pershing Square) (figure 8). A Playground Commission had been inaugurated in 1904, and the city had begun to construct a number of urban playgrounds (and a municipal recreation center) within a few short years (see figure 2).