

BOOK REVIEW

Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region

Greg Hise and William Deverell

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Part of our purpose in reprinting *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches* is to remind people that both the Olmsted and Bartholomew firms, as well as their associates and affiliates, played a significant role in shaping the urban West. With these design professionals as our guides, we needed then to imagine what the Los Angeles region would have looked like had the report been adopted and the recommendations implemented as planned. And because the report met with such focused and effective opposition, we needed to consider what it was about the plan that so worried the very same Los Angeles elites who had requested it in the first place. (Hise and Deverell 2000: viii)

History traditionally has been the domain of the victor rather than the vanquished, of the more powerful members of a society over the weaker, of the successful endeavor over the failed effort. More recently, a re-examination of histories has accelerated, leading to the

[re]discovery of other aspects, other people, other groups, other places and other events, along with their contributions to the shaping of space and process. There is a growing concern to create a more nuanced, expansive and complex reading of the past that better mirrors and explains the present. Planning history is no exception to this re-examination: numerous such explorations have enhanced our knowledge and expanded our understanding of the development of particular cities, the actors involved, and the processes and circumstances of urban development in general.

Eden by Design is such an exploration. It is the story of a lost opportunity, of a Los Angeles that might have been. It is a sad story in many ways, of abandonment, and confidence lost. At the same time, it is a celebration of a too-little known plan from the firms of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Harland Bartholomew. It is also an examination of the reasons for its minimization and near-disappearance, and a re-placement of the plan within the contexts of Los Angeles, planning history, and American urban development, where it might again influence and educate those interested in the improvement of urban space. Authors Greg Hise, associate professor at the University of Southern California, and William Deverell, associate professor at the California Institute of Technology, have done a great service in offering contemporary readers a view of the plan within these contexts.

The centerpiece of the book is a reproduction of the 1930 report *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region* by Olmsted Brothers and

Bartholomew & Associates. This bold planning report—commissioned for a citizens' committee formed through the prompting of the well-organized and powerful Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce—described in great detail the existing open space, parklands and beaches in the Los Angeles region; the shortcomings of the status quo and the changes needed to ensure and enhance the future social and economic well-being of the city; the legislation and political reorganization necessary to effect these changes; and the financing necessary to acquire and maintain the proposed system of parks and beaches.

Remarkably comprehensive in scope and range, sensitive to both extant proposals in Los Angeles and open space developments in other American cities, and replete with detailed charts, maps and appendices that graphically demonstrated the paucity of parklands in Los Angeles and the possibilities for great improvement that were within reach, the Olmsted/Bartholomew plan is a gem. It demonstrates both a sensitivity to the environment and an aspiration towards a regionalism with which many current readers can identify.

The authors call their effort “urban archeology.” In an extensive introductory essay, they place the unearthed plan within the political, social and economic context of late 1920s Los Angeles, and begin to make sense of the impetus for its creation and the reasons for its subsequent abandonment. Their narrative is a reconstruction from archival records and newspaper accounts, in particular a very thoughtful use of the minutes of the Los Angeles Chamber of

Commerce. The particular political battles, the anxiety over shifting power, the skepticism over what was possible, and the lack of will to commit resources to such a long-term investment are all skillfully woven together to create a logical path to the report's final presentation, when a mere two hundred copies were printed and distributed (mainly to the committee members) and then shelved.

The utility of the plan and the process of its creation range far beyond its time. Hise and Deverell place it within a more general context of urban politics and institutions. The shifting and multiple loci of power, the role of the state, the influence of a growth regime—all are contemporary concerns.

In an afterward/interview by landscape architect Laurie Olin that nicely rounds out the book, the 1930 plan and Olmsted's contributions to planning, design, and education are placed within both a personal view (in which Olin speaks of his admiration for Olmsted) and the context of current urban design. Olin also puts the plan within a larger time/space frame, noting that certain elements of the plan have become reality, and that the grand visions for open space in the Los Angeles region described in the Olmsted/Bartholomew report continue to resonate.

As the title suggests, Los Angeles was conceived by many as an Eden—not just found, but also deliber-

ately manufactured. Hise and Deverell have given us a most useful glimpse of just how this occurred, and who was active, at one point in that process. They remind us that, while the production of urban space is an “ongoing contest,” with much uncertainty, a maldistribution of burdens and benefits, created by small steps and fraught with politics, grand plans still are important tools to aid us in visualizing the future.

Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region. Greg Hise and William Deverell. Afterword by Laurie Olin, ASLA, AIA. The University of California Press, Berkeley. April 2000. 248 pp. ISBN 0-520-22414-0 (cloth), ISBN 0-520-22415-9 (paper).

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