

Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?



Library of Congress. [New York] : Published by Currier & Ives, c1862.

Supporting Questions

1. What did Frederick Law Olmsted think parks should be for?
2. How did Olmsted think his parks would improve people's lives?
3. What are the pluses and minuses of Olmsted's designs?

6-8 Grade Teaching with Primary Sources Hub Parks and Olmsted Inquiry by C3 Teachers Development

Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?

Inquiry Standard	D2.Civ.11.6-8. Differentiate among procedures for making decisions in the classroom, school, civil society, and local, state, and national government in terms of how civic purposes are intended.
Staging the Compelling Question	Begin the inquiry by facilitating a discussion about students' opinions about parks in their community.

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
What did Frederick Law Olmsted think parks should be for?	How did Olmsted think his parks would improve people's lives?	What are the pluses and minuses of Olmsted's designs?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Outline Olmsted's theories of landscape architecture using his words and photographs of his parks.	Develop a claim about Olmsted's theory of park development and list evidence in support of the claim.	Make a comparison chart to show the pluses and minuses of Olmsted's approach to park design.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
Source A: Excerpt from Olmsted letter to George W. Vanderbilt, July 12, 1889 Source B: Excerpt from Olmsted, letter to New York City Board of Commissioners, 1858 Source C: Excerpt from Olmsted—His Essential Theory by Charles E. Beveridge	Source A: Excerpt from report on design for Franklin Park, 1886 Source B: Excerpt from Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865	Source A: Excerpt from letter to Rudolph Ulrich, March 24, 1894 Source B: Excerpt from letter to Charles S. Sargent, August, 1891 Source C: Excerpt from Report on design for Prospect Park, 1866

Summative Performance Task	<p>ARGUMENT In this summative task, students will address the question; Do our parks do what they are supposed to? The question requires students to analyze the beliefs and designs of Olmsted as a foundational American landscape architect and evaluate his relevance. Based on their inquiry and evaluation, students should create a presentation that seeks to persuade a local parks and recreation department to either renovate or preserve a local park.</p> <p>EXTENSION Given students' understanding of Olmsted's theory of park development, students will design a park that meets his goals.</p>
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND Identify and describe a local park in your community.</p> <p>ASSESS Students will determine the extent to which the park does what it is supposed to do and how students can take action to improve the park's intended purpose.</p> <p>ACTION Depending on students' assessment of the local park they are studying, students will take action to improve the park (e.g. fundraiser, clean the park).</p>

Inquiry Description

One of the great things about a compelling inquiry question is that it can call students' attention to aspects of life that they have always taken for granted. "Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?" may elicit bemused frowns and, we hope, the counter-question "well, who is to say what a park is actually supposed to do?"

To Fredrick Law Olmsted, the father of American public park design, the answer was very clear: to serve and to civilize the public. This is summed up in his famous slogan, "service must precede art." Olmsted was one of many Gilded Age thinkers and philanthropists who were actively concerned with social issues. To them, the masses of workers were in danger of toiling away their lives in factories and polluted cities, never to enjoy the benefits of a natural and intelligent human existence. It was in the spirit of American republicanism to preserve public spaces that would act as safe places for all people, rich and poor. For this reason, parks should be places that reflected natural beauty, not faddish spectacles. The eye should not be attracted to any one thing, but rather should be led to take in the totality of the space. One should not even notice what was refreshing about a park; it should have the same effect as nature itself, enveloping one in to an entire experience.

However, there are some aspects of the Gilded Age mindset that may clash with the modern. Olmsted, like many of his contemporaries, saw the poor masses as deprived and uncivilized. His parks reflect what he saw as a need to develop and civilize them, but not necessarily to give them what they want. You will not see swing sets or baseball diamonds in an Olmsted park. Designers following his theories sometimes felt that these might lead simply to cheap excitement rather than a development of appreciation for beauty. More importantly, the idea that the working classes are culturally deprived can be seen as condescending.

Structure

This inquiry includes information to support teachers as they implement the instructional ideas in their classroom. The full instructional module should take 90-120 minutes. The module gives significant guidance with respect to the questioning that teachers can use. However, teachers should make the decision as to how to best present these questions, depending on the specific classroom context. For example, the questions and sources can be used as is or teachers could have students develop their own question as a replacement or in addition to the sources provided.

The supporting questions for this module stage a series of exercises that provide students with an opportunity to examine Olmsted's theory about how parks should function. Olmsted had very clear beliefs about parks, and supporting question #1 asks students to examine these views. Supporting question #2 digs into the topic a bit deeper by prompting students to think about how Olmsted thought parks would actually function in society to improve people's lives. Supporting question #3 also focuses on Olmsted's theory, but adds counter-perspectives by encouraging students to consider both the potential benefits of his design and possible drawbacks. All three supporting questions make use of personal correspondence and photographs of Olmsted's work.

Staging the Compelling Question

Compelling
Question

Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?

Staging the compelling question

After posing the compelling question, teachers might ask students for their gut reaction to the question. The following questions can be used to expand this initial discussion.

- What sorts of things are in your local park?
- What do people use the park for?
- Do you feel that people put your park to good use?

Supporting Question 1

Supporting Question	What did Frederick Law Olmsted think parks should be for?
Formative Performance Task	Outline Olmsted’s theories of landscape architecture using his words and photographs of his parks.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Source A: Excerpt from Olmsted letter to George W. Vanderbilt, July 12, 1889● Source B: Excerpt from Olmsted, letter to New York City Board of Commissioners, 1858● Source C: Excerpt from Olmsted—His Essential Theory by Charles E. Beveridge

With this supporting question, the teacher draws students’ attention to the notion that there are theories as to how a park “ought” to be designed. Teachers should introduce Olmsted to students by noting that he designed many of America’s most important parks, including Central Park in New York City, and that he was extremely influential in affecting how parks were built throughout the last half of the 19th century.

The sources included with this supporting question include a short excerpt from an Olmsted letter to George W. Vanderbilt on July 12, 1889 regarding Olmsted’s design of the Biltmore estate in Asheville, North Carolina. Accompanying the text are two photographs of the estate. One, showing Olmsted’s design of the road leading to the Biltmore, and the other of the Biltmore grounds. Additional sources include an Olmsted letter excerpt from 40 years prior to his work on the Biltmore and a short passage from an essay by Charles E. Beveridge. Taken together, these sources gently present Olmsted’s theory of park design.

Formative Performance Task

The formative performance task is to outline Olmsted’s theories of landscape architecture using his words and photographs of his parks. Teachers can support students’ as they develop this outline by having them analyze the three sources using the following prompts. These prompts are designed to help student sketch a theory about Olmsted.

- Read Olmsted’s letter to Vanderbilt and look at the Approach Road to the Biltmore Estate. The road is about a mile long. How would you describe this road? (Possible answers: It’s long, winding, rugged, narrow, or natural).
- Now look at the photograph of the Biltmore grounds. Is this an appropriate driveway for such a magnificent
- What did Olmsted mean by “service must precede art?” What did he mean by “service?” (Possible answers: it is immoral to use valuable (public?) resources for something that has no use. Art should be used to uplift people, and that includes meeting their needs)
- Do you agree with Olmsted? Does it matter if art “serves?”

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source A

Excerpt from Olmsted letter to George W. Vanderbilt, July 12, 1889

The Approach Road, Biltmore Estate.
Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Biltmore Estate, Asheville, NC



“I suggest that the most striking and pleasing impression will be obtained if an approach can be made that shall have throughout a natural and comparatively wild and secluded character; its borders rich with the varied forms of vegetation, and with incidents growing out of the vicinity of springs and streams and pools, steep banks and rocks, all consistent with the sensation of passing through the remote depths of a natural forest.”

Carr, E., Gagel, A., Shapiro, M. (2013). *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

The Italian Gardens, Biltmore Estate.
Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Biltmore Estate, Asheville, NC



Carr, E., Gagel, A., Shapiro, M. (2013). *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source B

Excerpt from Olmsted, letter to New York City Board of Commissioners, 1858

Excerpt

It is one great purpose of the Park to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God's handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month of two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances.

Source:

Carr, E., Gagel, A., Shapiro, M. (2013). *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source C

Excerpt from Olmsted—His Essential Theory by Charles E. Beveridge

Excerpt

Service must precede art. ... All turf, trees, flowers, fences, walks, water, paint, plaster, posts and pillars in which there is not a purpose of direct [usefulness] or service are inartistic, [and maybe] barbarous. ... So long as considerations of [usefulness] are neglected or overridden by considerations of ornament, there will be no true art.

Source:

Carr, E., Gagel, A., Shapiro, M. (2013). *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Supporting Question 2

Supporting Question	How did Olmsted think his parks would improve people's lives?
Formative Performance Task	Develop a claim about Olmsted's theory of park development and list evidence in support of the claim.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Source A: Excerpt from report on design for Franklin Park, 1886● Source B: Excerpt from Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865

In thinking whether Olmsted's theories are relevant to today, we have the opportunity to consider both his historical context and ours. The Gilded Age was a time of great social awareness. Olmsted shared the common belief that society had a duty to help the struggling masses of workers achieve a better life. Like other industrialists and philanthropists of the time such as Vanderbilt and Carnegie, Olmsted believed in the importance of literature and art for the education of the people. While they constructed libraries and galleries as their program of social uplift, Olmsted believed that it was the government's duty to set aside public land for the creation of public parks.

The parks were not to be places for fun and low entertainment. They were for contemplation of beauty.

Formative Performance Task

The formative performance task for this supporting question is to develop a claim about Olmsted's theory of park development and list evidence from the sources in support of the claim. Use the Library of Congress primary source analysis tool to support students as they analyze sources and develop this claim (www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources).

The sources for this supporting question include an 1865 Olmsted report on Yosemite and Big Tree Grove in California and an 1886 report from Olmsted on his design of Boston's Franklin Park. These sources lay out Olmsted's thinking about how people could improve their health and mental condition by interacting with nature. Olmsted's argument was consistent and focused. Have students pose a claim about Olmsted's thinking about the role of parks in improving the human condition.

Once the claim has been stated, students can make a list of Olmsted quotes that support the claim. By doing so, students will be able to both support and potentially reject Olmsted's theory. To enable thinking on both sides have students pose a counterclaim. Students might also locate evidence that would support their counterclaim.

Supporting Question 2

Featured Source A

Excerpt from report on design for Franklin Park, 1886



The urban elegance generally desired in a small public or private pleasure ground is to be methodically guarded against. Turf, for example, is to be in most parts preferred as kept short by sheep, rather than lawn mowers; well known and long tried trees and bushes to rare ones; natives to exotics; humble field flowers to high bred marvels; plain green leaves to the blotched, spotted and fretted leaves for which, in decorative gardening, there is now a passing fashion.

Franklin Park, sheep pastures, Emerald Necklace, Boston, MA

Supporting Question 2

Featured Source B

Excerpt from Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865

Excerpt

It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits, is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect beyond any other conditions which can be offered them... The lack of such occasional recreation where men and women are habitually pressed by their business or household cares often results in a class of disorders the characteristic quality of which is mental disability, sometimes taking the severe forms of softening of the brain, paralysis, palsey, monomania, or insanity, but more frequently of mental and nervous excitability, moroseness, melancholy, or irascibility, incapacitating the subject for the proper exercise of the intellectual and moral forces...

...The severe and excessive exercise of the mind which leads to the greatest fatigue...is almost entirely caused by [thinking about] the future...; to the laying up of wealth, to the preparation of something, to accomplishing something in the mind of another, and especially to small and petty details which are uninteresting in themselves and which engage the attention at all only because of the bearing they have on some general end of more importance which is seen ahead.

In the interest which natural scenery inspires there is the strongest contrast to this. It is for itself and at the moment it is enjoyed. The attention is aroused and the mind occupied without purpose, without ... thought or perception to some future end.

The enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes ... is thus a monopoly of a very few very rich people. The great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it. ... Private parks can never be used by the mass of the people in any country nor by any considerable number even of the rich....Thus without means are taken by government to withhold them from the grasp of individuals, all places favorable in scenery to the recreation of the mind and body will be closed against the great body of the people....The establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people under certain circumstances, is thus justified and enforced as a political duty.

Source:

Draft of Preliminary Report upon the Yosemite and Big Tree Grove, 1865

Supporting Question 3

Supporting Question	What are the pluses and minuses of Olmsted's designs?
Formative Performance Task	Make a comparison chart to show the pluses and minuses of Olmsted's approach to park design.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Source A: Excerpt from letter to Rudolph Ulrich, March 24, 1894• Source B: Excerpt from letter to Charles S. Sargent, August, 1891• Source C: Excerpt from Report on design for Prospect Park, 1866

Through an examination of this question, students begin to delve into the more subtle aspects of Olmsted's designs. The sources provided for this question include a set of four photographs accompanied by three brief excerpts from Olmsted letters and a report on the development of Prospect Park in Brooklyn.

Formative Performance Task

This chart calls on students to analyze and evaluate the sources--images as well as brief excerpts from Olmsted--and determine the positives and negatives to Olmsted's park design. Students will make a chart outlining the pluses or pros and minuses or cons to Olmsted's approach to park design.

Supporting Question 3

Featured Source A

Excerpt from letter to Rudolph Ulrich, March 24, 1894

Emerald Necklace, Boston



The thing is to make it appear that we found this body of water and its shores and have done nothing to them except at the landings and bridges. They were rich, rank, luxurious, crowded with vegetation, like the banks of some tropical rivers that I have seen on Louisiana bayous.

Carr, E., Gagel, A., Shapiro, M. (2013). *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Emerald Necklace, Boston



Carr, E., Gagel, A., Shapiro, M. (2013). *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Supporting Question 3

Featured Source B

Excerpt from letter to Charles S. Sargent, August, 1891



...the beauty of the designed sheets of foliage is thought to be better exhibited, and to have a more natural effect, when thus disposed over a backing of rough and deeply crannied, rather than of flat and dressed, stone.

Central Park, New York City

Supporting Question 3

Featured Source C

Excerpt from Report on design for Prospect Park, 1866



It is under similar conditions to these that we find in nature that class of scenery...which is termed pastoral. It consists of combinations of trees, standing singly or in groups, and casting their shadows over broad stretches of turf, or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools, and the predominant associations are in the highest degree tranquilizing and grateful, as expressed by the Hebrew poet: 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.'

The Long Meadow in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. Photograph courtesy of National Park Service, Olmsted National Historic Site.

Summative Performance Task

Compelling Question	Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?
Argument	In this summative task, students will address the question; Do our parks do what they are supposed to? The question requires students to analyze the beliefs and designs of Olmsted as a foundational American landscape architect and evaluate his relevance. Based on their inquiry and evaluation, students should create a presentation that seeks to persuade a local parks and recreation department to either renovate or preserve a local park.
Extension	Given students' understanding of Olmsted's theory of park development, students will design a park that meets his goals.

Argument

Situating the task in the context of a local debate can enhance this summative task. Teachers should seek out a local or regional park that has been in the news or that might be the subject of some debate about its design.

Teachers should have students write a brief arguing for a particular design to be implemented in the selected park. Students should draw on Olmsted's ideas, either in support or in opposition, as evidence to support their claims about how their local park should be designed.

Here are some questions that teachers can use to guide students in developing their arguments.

- Why might Olmsted think that river banks should be “crowded with vegetation?” Is that a good idea or a bad idea? What is gained and what is lost by planting the river bank?
- Why does Olmsted think that “craggy” stones make the trees (“foliage”) look better? How is this similar to his thoughts about “the Approach Road” from the Biltmore Estate? How is it similar to the untended river banks? Is the use of craggy stones a good idea or a bad idea?

Extension

Designing a park, that meets Olmsted's goals, will demonstrate students' understanding of Olmsted's theory of parks. This design can take many forms; it may be a digital design (e.g. VoiceThread, Glogster) or something more concrete (e.g. areal map, diorama, poster).

Taking Informed Action

Understand	Identify and describe a local park in your community.
Assess	Students will determine the extent to which the park does what it is supposed to do and how students can take action to improve the park's intended purpose.
Action	Depending on students' assessment of the local park they are studying, students will take action to improve the park (e.g. fundraiser, clean the park).

Analysis and evaluation of the local park will determine what is needed to improve the park and call the students into action. Student's assessment of the park may lead to a recognition of a litter problem in the park, therefore the park needs a clean sweep or a fundraiser for more trashcans. Another assessment may determine that there is a lack of sitting area in the park, therefore students may feel it is necessary to raise funds for a bench in the park. This taking informed action task engages students in the process of being agents of change in their communities and at large.

