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Penetrable Landscape as Democratic Form: A Walk with Olmsted

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Frederick Law Olmsted's 1850 walking tour through Britain inspired his eventual shift from journalism and farming to a career as America's preeminent landscape architect.¹

Intrigued by his charming account of the trip,² by the anachronistic notion of walking freely from town to town and by the prospect of seeing some of what influenced the great place-maker, I set out with my wife to follow the route taken by the Olmsted party through the Welsh marches.

A major result of our experience is the realization that the British landscape is characterized by a kind of penetrability that even now helps put the private citizen consciously in touch with public surroundings by means generally unfamiliar to Americans. Olmsted also seems to have been affected by the openings between private and public domains he found in Britain.

The penetrability is achieved there not by eliminating lines of demarcation between the domains (a logical impossibility, however seductive) but by heightening the awareness and pleasure of crossing the lines.

For us, it all started in Chester, where we joined the Olmsted route on its way south from Liverpool. In Chester, penetrability is built into the architecture as "the Rows," a tier of second-story, arcaded walkways situated

on top of street-level shops—continuing around corners and accessible by frequent open stairways from the sidewalks below. They have been there for 700 years, even though the buildings that incorporate them have changed totally.

The walkways draw the visitor through Chester by means of limited disclosures, promises of reward and opportunities to make choices. They invite participation by giving visitors, wherever they happen to be standing in the town, glimpses of something interesting but not entirely knowable. Olmsted relished the suspense created by the “unexplainable passages and unaccountable recesses” of the Rows.



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At nearly every point in Chester, the scene presents a variety of reachable destinations and usually more than one route to each, asking visitors to make frequent decisions about how to proceed. All this decision making calls for a kind of consciousness—an attention to one’s position in the cityscape.

Among the rewards offered for the visitor’s exertions in Chester are new vistas, textures, patterns, and uses of material (building styles vary considerably). Comforting refuges and a liberating sense of open space accompanied by eccentricity, novelty, surprise, and a remnant from the past greet the visitor

1 **The walls that separate public scene from private property** in Chester, England, are not the hard and fast lines that put modern man in the binary bind of either *in* or *out*. Photograph by Dean W. O’Brien

2 **The Rows**, though spiffed up a bit since Olmsted saw them 135 years ago, still contain “unexplainable passages and unaccountable recesses” to explore. Photograph by Dean W. O’Brien



3

3 Cloisters provide a resonant sense of “mirroring,” a simultaneous looking out from and looking in at. Photograph by Dean W. O’Brien

4 Steps and stiles on an English footpath promise the reward of a new view to the rambler who will only make the short climb to the top. Photograph by Dean W. O’Brien

who moves through the city, ever departing from the certainties of a present location.

But these are the quiet, perceptual pleasures of moving personally through the world. Their voltage is so low they might not immediately register on a sensibility customarily entertained by the screech of car chases through the stark streets of a televised city. Nor would the rewards work for a bureaucratic mentality bent on routinizing decisions and eliminating “unaccountable recesses.”

Chester asserts a gratifying relationship between public space and private space not only by inviting exploration but also by facilitating “intrusions,” much as it did for Olmsted:

We found ourselves in one of the narrow covered ways, and . . . kept on in it, to go where it should happen to lead. Sometimes wide, sometimes narrow, running first, as it appeared, between a man’s kitchen and his dining room; then into a dust-yard, and turned one side by a stable . . . then through a blacksmith’s shop into a dark crooked passage like the gallery of a mine, at the end of which we found ourselves on a paved street not far from the cathedral.⁵

Though spiffed up a bit since Olmsted’s time, the Rows are still public rights-of-way through private property,





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5 **Small, thoughtful adjustments** through the years make a snug fit between the landscape and human activity. Photograph by Polly O'Brien

avenues that penetrate and link venues to give participants the sense of a larger public whole and of how its constituent parts connect with it. This public weaving in and out of private areas takes time, requires movement and thrives on sequence strategies, much as a good picture book or movie does. It differs in that respect from two other devices that make Chester such an elegant walk-through metaphor of linkages between Self and Other: intermediate space and mirroring.

Both *In* and *Out* at Once

Intermediate space works more like an inviting still photograph—through the celebration of a particular, single moment when at least two things were simultaneously present together. In Chester, intermediate space is abundantly provided by the walk along the top of the medieval walls that encircle the city as well as by the Rows. Both give visual access *in* and *out* at the same time, and the Rows even give the tactile sense of *being* at once *in* shelter and *out* in the open. Both walkway designs keep the participant from being locked out of the separate venues while simultaneously preventing entrapment inside any one of them, disconnected from the broader public scene.

As a result, as a visitor one finds oneself at the center

of the interaction between private and public, busily mediating between *in* and *out* to shape new perceptions that accommodate the two logically irreconcilable realities, experiencing the both-at-once paradox of consciousness.

The other paradox made vivid by the town is the sense of oneself being similar to and yet different from others—a kind of mirroring. In an earlier article in *Places*, Warren Boeschstein remarks that “when viewed from below or across the street, the bays of the Rows provide appropriate frames in which clusters of people may gather” and that “it is as beautiful to look out from as it is to look [in] at.”⁴

Standing in a bay of the Rows and looking out to where others can be seen framed in a bay across the street, the explorer in Chester can hardly resist thinking, “That’s about how I must look to them.” We encountered much the same physical and psychological situation looking across the courtyards of cloisters we visited, from Chester cathedral to Laycock Abbey.

As we hiked south out of Chester along Olmsted’s original route, we were offered the license and the invitation to enter private spheres over and over again, much as we had done in the architectural environment of Chester, often walking a mile in another person’s property, to twist an aphorism.

Altogether, there are 120,000 miles of public footpaths in England and Wales, creating what is probably the most penetrable civilized landscape anywhere in the world.

An expression of the penetrability is the fact that, according to *Walker’s Britain*, trespassing itself is not a legally actionable offense.⁵ When private property is damaged, the landowner can bring suit to have the rambler pay for the cost of repair. But if the rambler merely strays from the public right-of-way as it penetrates the back regions of privacy, then the landowner can do no more than gently force the visitor back onto the path.

We had no such trouble. Lloyd, the gardener, conspiratorially let us through the duke’s private grounds at Eaton Hall, a woman patiently directed us out of her yard and back to the elusive Wat’s Dyke path, the farmer at Middle Sontley insisted on showing us the ponds he was building.

Probably the deepest penetration into private precincts is the pleasure of lodging at the ubiquitous bed-and-breakfast places, where the traveler is so warmly taken into so many interesting homes. “This would never work in America,” an American minister said during an evening chat in a b-and-b at Chirk. “You wouldn’t dare open your house to strangers in our country. No



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6 Bed-and-breakfast places everywhere and 120,000 miles of footpaths, help England and Wales to have a highly penetrable environment. Photograph by Dean W. O'Brien



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7 Walkers in Britain escape the hermetic shell of package tourism and its predictable lodgings and restaurants. Photograph by Dean W. O'Brien

telling what they might do." Although they are multiplying rapidly now, the American bed-and-breakfasts of course bear little resemblance to the open, egalitarian model so widespread in Britain.

Deep Resonance or Clear Direction

The footpath was often ambiguous, and finding it was a matter of continual speculation. There were adamant barriers and moments of lost hope, but overall we were able to wander through backyards, farm yards, playing fields, woods, along medieval dykes and on hills above the sound of church bells among flocks of sheep—helped by thoughtfully crafted stiles, convenient gates and subtle indications now and then of where the path might be. As Brenda Colvin writes, footpaths "draw attention to the landscape insinuatingly rather than aggressively."

There was often a subliminal comfort in sensing that the precise, step-by-step route achieved a snug fit between nature and humanity through the complicity of attentive little adjustments made over the centuries—someone moving a stone out of the way in Cromwell's time, putting in a step or stile when Richard Lionheart was clanking about, adding a handrail, detouring off the direct route to appreciate a pretty vista, finding an easier way around a hill, making

the footing firmer—tunings made possible by an experience of the landscape shared deeply in the muscles across generations of human beings as they come and go.

In significant contrast, hikers in the United States are more familiar with clearly marked public footpaths laid out through controlled public parklands by experts or committees who may not have experienced the landscape so deeply or directly but who have rules against changing the route once it is set. On American paths, the loss in resonance and meaning is presumably offset by gains in clarity and the kind of convenience that relieves the walker of the need to pay closely differentiated attention to the environment. American distinctions between private and public seem to be aggressively binary, either-or constructs that impoverish both private and public realms.⁷ George Chadwick argues that “we have got used to thinking of park space as something apart from the town and its life: we must bring it back and interweave with it the threads of living, working, and moving.”⁸

Borders That Come and Go

Olmsted had trouble accepting the artifice of some British lines between inside and outside. A gate he came across “alone and unsupported by anything in the vicinity” disturbed him.



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8 Climbing to Castell Dinas
Brân at Llangollen
Photograph by Dean W.
O'Brien

“It seems intended as an impressive preface to a great display of art within; but here as well as at Eaton Park, and other places I have seen, it is not followed up with any great things, the grounds immediately within the grand entrance being simple, and apparently rather neglected by the gardener.”⁹ While he may be savoring the absurdity drily, it is more probable that his celebrated practical turn of mind is finding it difficult to accept such a blatant sign that the distinction between inside and outside *is* artificial.

We, too, came upon several freestanding masonry gates along the route—gates with no extended wall on either side so that we could easily walk entirely around them. In one gloriously surrealistic situation, the meaningless gate was padlocked.

The abundance of ruins and ancient dykes and the walls that wander incoherently around the countryside of contemporary Britain make it hard to miss the arbitrary, transitory character of the lines people draw to distinguish *in* from *out*. The message of these historical leftovers parallels Post-Modernism in architecture (showing how structurally unnecessary but humanly intentional many elements of design are),¹⁰ Post-Structuralism in literary criticism (emphasizing that most lines of difference, thought to be givens, are

not),¹¹ and feminism (revealing quite a few “biological” differences and “necessities” as fabrications to support some chosen social construct).

And in psychoanalysis, the patient learns that the border between the unconscious and conscious can be crossed safely, joyfully and productively because the border is no more daunting than those dreamwork gates of Britain, easily walked around or seen through.

The choice is between (1) seeing through borders, which means seeing them *as* borders, and (2) seeing only limits, as if they were not actually constructed borders. To survive, democracies have to encourage the first option. The Rows of Chester and the public footpaths of England do.

Not all borders are on the landscape, though. Some are portable, surrounding the observer wherever he or she goes. Modern technology and logistical expertise have made “packaged tourists” possible and numerous, even considering the slight recent decline in their numbers in Britain.¹²

Run through the landscape in motor coaches and processed through predictable restaurants and lodgings, these packaged tourists find it nearly impossible to get around behind the surfaces and thus penetrate the environment. Reciprocally, they are unlikely to *be*

penetrated very deeply by the experience of Britain.

The walking tour diminishes the hermetic shell of modern logistics and technology while heightening environmental penetrability and personal autonomy. It may ultimately have been this form of travel, accommodated by the design of the British landscape, that more than anything else gave Olmsted such inspiration for expressing democracy in environmental forms. It continues to offer intimations of how a democratic landscape might look and work.

The enthusiasm for clear, open public space isolated from private complication has taken too strong a hold on the American imagination of public reality, accounting to some extent for the conversion of visible public arenas to deserted space primarily suitable for easy maintenance and car chases—not places for the subtle but authentic pleasure of the interplay between private and public, person and scene. Meanwhile, enclosed shopping malls and other private fiefdoms masquerade as yesterday’s public main street.

Kathryn Hume says of a particularly skillful science-fiction writer, “We learn how shaky our sense of reality is when we find that we have entered his created world and lost awareness of the frame.”¹³ In an enclosed shopping mall, as many of them are now designed, we

are more often simply taken in, not noticing we have lost awareness of the frame.

In Chester or on the footpaths of England it is clear when the citizen makes a choice, crossing the border, *in* or *out*. “Fasten gates, even if you find them open,” the Country Code directs, and most Englishmen do. “And keep to paths, if they exist.”

Notes

- 1 The change, at least from journalism, was not as outlandish as it may at first seem, given Olmsted’s lifelong concern for the public scene and his continuing commitment to what he called “communicativeness.”
- 2 Frederic Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967). Original publication 1852.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 4 Walter Boeschstein, “Chester, England: Urban Design Ideas from an Ancient Source,” *Places*, Volume 2, Number 4, p. 13.
- 5 Andrew Duncan, ed., *Walker’s Britain* (London: Pan Books/Ordnance Survey, 1982), p. 10.
- 6 Brenda Colvin, *Land and Landscape: Evolution, Design and Control* (London: John Murray, 1973), p. 371.
- 7 Dean W. O’Brien, “Framing the Pseudoenvironment,” *Landscape* (Spring 1982), pp. 26–32.
- 8 George F. Chadwick, *The Park and the Town: Public*

Landscape in the 19th and 20th Centuries (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 374.

9 Olmsted, op. cit., p. 52.

10 As expressed, for example, in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1977).

11 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

12 Ogilvy and Mather, "The Current Market for American Pleasure Travel in Europe: 1981 "Image" Study," a mimeographed report prepared for the British Tourist Authority, 1981.

13 Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 131.



9

9 Chester's medieval wall
Photograph by Dean W. O'Brien