

Riverside

Riverside, Illinois

Photographs by Alan Ward 1977, 1996

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. began working for a land developer on the suburban community of Riverside in 1868. The 1600-acre flat site of mostly prairie had two advantages: a twenty-minute railroad link to Chicago and the Des Plaines River on the south side. Olmsted capitalized on both to realize his vision of the “ruralistic beauty of a loosely built New England village with a certain degree of the material and social advantages of towns.” Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux laid out curvilinear drives with planted medians of varying widths, with the adjacent grades slightly elevated to reduce the visibility of the road. A park and drive along the river preserved existing trees in the floodplain and included a network of public paths. Where the river curves northward toward the train stop, paths connect to the village center - a civic focus in the community with the rail station, water tower and commercial buildings (10-12). Additional parks that recall New England commons and greens were interspersed in neighborhoods. The site was transformed with the planting of 32,000 deciduous trees and 7,000 evergreens. It is a compelling diagram for building a new community that combines an American ideal of a degree of urbanity in a town along with residences set in the countryside.*

My goal was to illustrate the principal organizing features of Riverside,

beginning with the framework of curving drives set in the topography with residences. A panoramic camera was set up at a few key locations framing broad horizontal images that reveal a series of curves in the drives along the parks, the subtle grading of the roads and the building lots with the canopies of mature trees overhead (2-8). There are a range of lot sizes from the small plots along an existing street that was parallel to the train tracks and retained by Olmsted, along with half acre lots along parks. Locations were selected that show significant examples of the architectural designs of some of the residences (6). Multiple views of the water tower and adjacent buildings illustrate how these landmark structures are perceived within the landscape approaching the train station, along paths and drives leading to the heart of Riverside (10-12). The photographs were made after waiting through nearly two days of rain in Chicago; however the very wet surroundings created favorable conditions with darkened tree trunks and paved surfaces reflecting light. The rain also flooded the park along the Des Plaines River, which allowed me to show the planning principle of preserving the floodplain for parkland in the 200' to 300' zone along the river (16-17). This set of images illustrates the beauty of Riverside, but more importantly, the exceptional planning effort by landscape architects that guided the making of this community.

List of Photographs

1. Des Plaines River, 1977
2. Road and park after rainfall, 1996
3. Road and park, 1996
4. Curving road and park, 1996
5. Curving road with median, 1996
6. Wright's Coonley house, 1996
7. Example of a road graded at a lower elevation, 1977
8. Street with tree canopy, 1996
9. Riverside Presbyterian Church, 1996
10. Riverside Public Library, 1996
11. Water Tower from Forest Avenue, 1996
12. Water Tower and Train Station from Riverside Road, 1996
13. Park along Des Plaines River, 1977
14. Steps in park along Des Plaines River, 1977
15. Park and path along the river, 1977
16. Park in the floodplain after a storm, 1996
17. Path and flooded park along the river, 1996



































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Robinson, Michael, "The Suburban Ideal: 19th-Century Planned Communities," *Historic Preservation*, April-June 1978

Ward, Alan, *American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic Interpretation*, 1998

Otis, Denise, "Father Nature," *Garden Design*, October/November 1995

* See Witold Rybczynski's well-researched *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the 19th Century* for information on Olmsted and Vaux's plan for Riverside