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Ashland Park: A Sympathetic Bungalow Environment

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ASHLAND PARK is in Lexington, Kentucky. Its name comes from the estate of Henry Clay, America’s foremost nineteenth-century senator. Henry Clay called his suburban home "Ashland" after the native trees abounding on the property, and Ashland Park is a subdivision made from Clay’s estate. The boundary of Lexington had remained fixed for 116 years, and the area considered was taken into the initial extension of the city limits of 1907. Ashland Park was among the first subdivisions and the principal one laid out in this addition. It had an innovative informality that was to be adopted in the later residential expansion of the city.

Lexington originally was contained within the circumference of a mile-radius circle centered on the courthouse, within which was a rectangular grid with a few radiating streets continuous with turnpikes connecting to neighboring towns. The race track, trotting track and fairgrounds were adjacent to the city limits on the northeast and southwest. At the beginning of the twentieth century the community was growing mostly toward the southeast, penetrating the city’s perimeter. With the inclusion of a part of "Ashland" in the first extension of the city, making the land too valuable for farming, the Clay descendants decided to dispose of the front part for building lots. Later, more of the estate was added to Ashland Park, the family keeping the mansion on a sizable tract, which was to become an historic-house museum in 1950.

Development of the original Ashland Park was put into the hands of Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts. John Charles and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., were the proprietors of a landscaping firm having a venerable record. It came into existence in 1858, when the elder Frederick Law Olmsted in partnership with Calvert Vaux won first prize for the plan of Central Park and undertook the construction of that well-known natural landscape preserve in America’s leading metropolis. Eight years later they
contracted for a similar project in the adjoining city of Brooklyn, and Prospect Park has been acclaimed the finest garden of this kind in the United States. Olmsted and Vaux dissolved partnership in 1873 (although they were to work together on several undertakings subsequently), and a few years later Olmsted took his nephew and adopted son, John Charles Olmsted, a recent graduate of Yale university, into the office. The young man was given a financial interest in the firm in 1878, and in 1884, following removal of the office from New York to Brookline, he was made a partner. Besides those in Greater New York City the Olmsted name is linked with natural landscape parks in Boston, Hartford, Rochester, Detroit, Dayton, Chicago, Louisville, Charleston, Palo Alto and other cities; with national and historic parks, including Yosemite, Niagara Falls, Blue Licks Battlefield in Kentucky, and Mount Royal Park in Montreal; the layout of the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893; and country estates, such as George W. Vanderbilt’s “Biltmore” at Asheville, North Carolina. Frederick Law Olmsted retired in 1895, and his son and namesake entered the firm, becoming a partner with his cousin and half-brother (the senior Olmsted having married his brother’s widow and John Charles’ mother in 1859) three years later.

Natural landscaping characterized the work of the Olmsteds, originally for pleasure parks and later for residential precincts, as in Ashland Park. Such an application was not without precedent. In 1857 Llewellyn S. Haskell collaborated with Alexander Jackson Davis in developing his estate in the foothills of the Orange Mountains of New Jersey into a rural complex. Topographic features were kept as intact as much as was practical. Drives followed the contours of the land, dividing it into ample home sites on which were built villas in the current romantic styles. Parcels were reserved on the crest of Eagle Ridge for Haskell’s own rustic lodge, “Eyrie,” and Davis’ medieval retreat, “Wildmont.”

A. J. Davis was America’s finest architect of mid-nineteenth-century revival-manner buildings. His designs appeared in Andrew Jackson’s popular writings on horticulture and country living, prominently in Downing’s best-known book, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, which came out in 1850. Davis’ creations were in the more sophisticated styles, Gothic castellated and “pointed” cottage types, and Italianate villas. Downing himself contributed the more vernacular farmhouses and bracketed cottages. Although meant to be sited on small independent farms,
Fig. 1  Map of Llewellyn Park, L. S. Haskell Estate, New Jersey. Layout of 1857. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.
Fig. 2 Perspective and first floor plan for a symmetrical bracketed cottage. A. J. Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses, New York, 1850, Design III, p. 83. Prototype bungalow characteristics are: stress on roof, lack of traditional styles in features, casual planning, and intimacy with nature.
the landscaping for these country dwellings was similar to that of Llewellyn Park. As indicated by the dating of these enterprises, Haskell and Davis followed Downing’s lead in their designing, and not the other way around.

A. J. Downing also contributed to the launching of Frederick Law Olmsted’s career in having first recommended the creation of Central Park. It was in an article that appeared in the August 1851 issue of his periodical, the *Horticulturist*. At that time New York City officials were contemplating the purchase of a 150-acre tract alongside the East River, extending from 64th to 75th Street. Downing urged that the public park be in the middle of Manhattan Island, as being more accessible to the most people, and that it should contain not less than 500 acres. His advice was taken, and Olmsted and Vaux brought to realization many of the features Downing had described. Central Park was to include more than 800 acres. Calvert Vaux was a young English architect who was hired as Downing’s assistant in 1850. After Downing drowned in the steamboat “Henry Clay” disaster two years later, Vaux compiled a book of house designs called *Villas and Cottages*. It resembled those of and was dedicated to his mentor. The book came out in 1857, at about the time he joined Olmsted in devising the prize-winning “Greensward” plan for Central Park.

Olmsted and Vaux were still partners when “Riverside” was designed in 1869. The tract was a model suburban residential community on the Des Plaines River near Chicago. Its layout was reminiscent of Llewellyn Park, only it adjoined a meandering stream rather than being on high ground, and it lacked the exclusiveness and remoteness of its New Jersey predecessor. The Illinois endeavor was more democratic, the building sites smaller and arranged in blocks, which were bisected by a straight traffic artery for direct access to the outside world. The purchasers were to be yearlong residents who were involved in an industrial nation, yet they were to live in a semirural setting that had unspoiled stretches along the river for their leisure enjoyment. “Riverside” was a milestone in community planning, but Olmsted and Vaux did little residential suburban work. This was to become the specialty of the following generation, Olmsted Brothers.

During the early to mid 1890s Frederick Law Olmsted developed a number of natural landscape parks on the perimeter of Louisville, Kentucky. Some were given the names of aboriginal tribes—Cherokee Park, Shawnee Park, and Iroquois Park. Eventually
Fig. 3 Olmsted Brothers’ plan for Ashland Park, Lexington, Kentucky, as conceived in 1908. Courtesy of the Historic Preservation Office of the Lexington Fayette Urban County Government.
suburbs by Olmsted Brothers grew up adjacent to them. The residential districts did not predate the design for Ashland Park, although some were begun before it materialized. The early Louisville landscape parks at least called attention to the Olmsted expertise on landscaping to the rival city of Lexington.

Fig. 4  Bungalows at the southwest corner of Slashes and McDowell Roads, Ashland Park. (photo 1990)

The basic plan for “Ashland” (the suffix “Park” was to be added later), “A Portion of the McDowell Estate” (the McDowells were the Henry Clay legatees), was delineated in 1908, the year following the inclusion of the land within the city limits. The area was southwest of Richmond Pike, a continuation of East Main Street, and extended to the rear of the lots on Fontaine Road; and it began midway between Ashland and Hanover avenues, stretching southeasterly to the back of the lots on McDowell Road. Henry Clay’s home was beyond, facing the future Sycamore Road, whose building sites were to back up against lots on the near side of McDowell Road. The Colonial Revival home of Thomas McDowell had been built recently at the corner of Hanover Avenue and Main Street, and thus was the first building constructed within Ashland Park. Rails for an electric trolley were shown running through the
median of Hanover Avenue, and they branched at the lower end to skirt "The Slashes," but only the stretch along Hanover was to be built and operate. "The Slashes" was the outstanding feature of the layout, being a broad strip of natural landscaping starting at the junction of Euclid Avenue and Tates Creek Pike and winding through the precinct. It was flanked by the two sections of Slashes Road. The other drives also were called "roads," which name, first used for streets inside Lexington, of course called attention to their rural character. The 1908 working plan included dotted lines indicating building site restrictions. It was redrawn without them, and without the trolley tracks, stress being laid upon the contours of building lots within the fifteen blocks, and each was given a number to facilitate negotiation of sales. In both plans the direction compass is shown in reverse. The long arm nearest the layout is actually toward the north.

The project waited for a decade before it was launched officially. The distribution of lots was announced in the 4 August 1919 issue of the Lexington Herald as beginning on the following (Tuesday) morning at 10 o'clock. "Olmstead" (a frequent misspelling of the name) Brothers were lauded as "the greatest Landscape Architects in America," sharing honors with the land itself as being "historic soil once occupied by the Great Commoner, Henry Clay!" The term "Park" still was not used in the advertisement. It may have been adopted shortly from the newly developed Mentelle Park, across Richmond Pike, consisting of rows of houses facing two parallel streets embracing a planted median. A physical change in the realization of Ashland Park is that the two sections of "The Slashes" nearest to Tates Creek Pike were converted into building sites, and the first road in from Hanover Avenue was lengthened over to Fontaine Road, the end corresponding to South Slashes Road on the Olmsted Plan. It was all called Desha Road. The second road running in the same direction became all Irving, and Catalpa and Woodlake both became McDowell Road. Comparison with a modern survey shows that some of the larger lots, especially on Slashes Road, were cut up into smaller home sites, some of them becoming triangular. This probably was the innovation of plot purchasers.

Houses built in Ashland Park were unlike the nineteenth century revival and eclectic architecture of earlier developments. In 1919 the bungalow was at the peak of its popularity, although it was rivaled by two-story, box-like residences, some showing affinities
to the then-current arts and crafts movement. Plain two-storied buildings were often duplexes, but bungalows were nearly always for single families. They were the more sensitive to a pastoral setting, to which the long Olmsted background of natural planning had left its stamp on Ashland Park. The bungalow’s informal layout, rustic members, natural materials, subdued colors, emphasis upon roof rather than wall, and intimate relationship between enclosed space and landscape setting furthered the Downing bracketed-style ideal in becoming the primary form of American architecture sympathetic to the verdant environment. The integration of bungalow and landscape design in Ashland Park is quite consummate. Ashland Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. It was part of the nationwide recognition program of the Olmsteds.

Fig. 5. Bungalows at the southwest corner of Slashes and east side of McDowell Roads. (photo 1990)

The characteristic undulating streets of the Olmstedses persevered in the later enlargement of Ashland Park, and became the model for subdivisions that were implanted beyond and began mushrooming adjacent to every traffic artery radiating from Lexington. By the 1930s the bungalow style had expired, and the comparable small dwelling became the stark ranch house or
featureless International Style residence. Neither fitted so well into a rural atmosphere. Topographic features and indigenous planting were bulldozed to oblivion. The automobile took over, trolleys became motor buses, and broad paving connected public streets to residences, which now had carports or garages with wide doors in front. The living quarters receded to the rear, and with the elimination of the bungalow porch, humanity all but disappeared from view. Curving streets remained a convention that complicated, needlessly, the shape of lots, the identification of addresses, and the driver's sense of direction. Above all, it lent cartographic confusion to the city, which, in Lexington (present population 213,000), retained a sane street grid only at the nucleus. One can find a similar situation in other older communities that have grown rapidly during this century. One looks back with nostalgia on the bungalow period as a time of fruition, during which people lived a humanistic existence, with just enough mechanical conveniences to make life comfortable, unaware that they were on the brink of a crowded, mechanized, standardized age of artificialities, gadgetry, and uncontrolled expansion.

Fig. 6  Bungalows at the northeast corner of Slashes and Irving Roads. (photo 1990)