

Sudbrook Park's Olmsted Heritage: Guidelines for Landscaping Sudbrook's Public Spaces

BACKGROUND

Although the community has not located Olmsted's specific planting plans for Sudbrook Park, it can obtain guidance in preserving and replenishing its Olmsted-designed landscape from Olmsted's letters to the Sudbrook Company, his writings and principles generally, and the landscaping description written by Edward Straka for Riverside, Illinois (Olmsted's first suburban village). The National Association for Olmsted Parks' Workbook Series, Vol. 3, "Defining an Ethic for Designed Landscapes" by Charles A. Birnbaum, ASLA, also provides relevant information. All of these sources were used in preparing these guidelines.

The land that became Sudbrook Park contained both wooded and open land. Olmsted wrote that the Sudbrook Company was to plant trees along the ten-foot planting spaces that bordered the roadways in the open areas (such as Cliveden Road); these trees were to be fifty feet apart and across from each other to provide a continuous umbrella of shade when mature. The graveled walk paths (either five or six-foot wide) were situated next to the planting strips in the open land, so they too would be shaded by the trees. In the wooded areas (along Windsor Road, for example), the order was reversed: the walk path was to be situated adjacent to the turf gutter with the planting strip beyond that. Trees were to be planted behind the path to supplement and appear a part of the existing forested area. Olmsted's cross sections for Sudbrook's roadways contain instructions on the contouring of the roads (which were sunk below grade to minimize their impact on the landscape), the planting strips and tree planting instructions, the walk paths and the formation of turf curbs and gutters.

Portions of Sudbrook Park were heavily wooded with oaks, hickory and chestnut trees in 1889. Most of the hickory and chestnut trees have been lost. Oaks still predominate on Windsor and Adana Roads. Norway maples predominate along Cliveden Road. But Sudbrook lost a large number of its majestic oaks and other mature trees during construction of the rapid transit through the community. The first summer after construction, Sudbrook again lost up to 80% of the new plantings because of a severe drought and theft. Moreover, many of Sudbrook Park's trees are old and have been lost through age or storms; routine replenishment must be continued to preserve the ambiance of the community (Sudbrook began this effort with its earlier participation in the Tremendous Maryland program). It takes forty or more years for an oak to reach a substantial size. Unless replenishment is increased and maintained on an annual basis, the setting so valued by residents may be lost.

Olmsted understood the power of naturalistic scenery and went to great lengths to create an overall landscape design that would provide a tranquil respite from the "cramped, confusing and controlled" conditions of the city. In his report on Riverside, he specified that each homeowner should be required to plant at least two trees between the house and road. He wanted no individual plant or single species to detract from the totality of his

design; thus, he did not use or permit flowers or flower gardening plants to be used in his public spaces (gardens, if desired, were to be reserved for private rear and side yards). In an effort to beautify several of our public triangles, and before information about Olmsted's landscaping principles was known, individual residents planted flowering plants on several of the triangles; these should be removed to private yards as part of the comprehensive re-landscaping of Sudbrook Park's public spaces.

Olmsted's intent for Sudbrook was to create a rural, country-like setting. His curvilinear roads, slightly depressed below grade, blended unobtrusively into the adjacent landscape rather than detracting from it. Native plants were used whenever possible; the species had to be conducive to the natural scene. As noted by Ed Straka in the Riverside guidelines:

Natural variation was established with unequal size and spacing of plant species, by varying sizes of green masses or groupings, and by contrasting open spaces with areas of plantings. Plants of different age and maturity were used to recreate natural progression and reforestation. Plant groups were formed by the use of multiples of like species and multiples of similar compatible species. The subtle variation in color tint and leaf texture enriched the grouping and accentuated the mass.

Varying heights of plants were used to create a layering effect to the landscape. Trees were intermixed with understory plantings to gently diminish the planting groups from their highest point down to the ground. Understory plantings were used to fill in or intensify the masses, to screen where desired, to form wind breaks, to create variety, and to show the rich quality of nature.

The overall quality of the landscape was the lush colors of "green" plantings supplemented by the cool "blue" of the sky . . . ; a landscape that was a variety of tints and textures of green foliage against a blue background.

Other points noted by Straka were that planting borders were to have curving, not straight, edges; trimming should be done only where absolutely necessary; the composition should be a unified and harmonious variety of landscape experiences; and exotic, spectacular, vivid colored or foreign items would disturb the impact of the landscape and were not to be used.

Site investigation and analysis, and plan development, are necessary prerequisites to appropriate site reconstruction. Thus, before beginning to re-landscape, certain preliminary steps are necessary.

PRELIMINARY STEPS

1. Prepare an historic record documentation of plant materials in Sudbrook Park's public spaces, including all triangles, along the streetscape and in the Sudbrook Stream Valley Park. Recent research on Sudbrook's history and Olmsted design yielded some, but not extensive, information about pre-existing and selected plant

materials used in early Sudbrook Park. This should be compiled for future reference. Any additionally discovered research should be added when found.

2. Survey and document existing trees and plant materials.
3. Determine appropriate preservation treatment in consultation with Olmsted scholars and landscape architects.
4. Create a preservation planting plan and plant list; every effort should be made to match the scale, form, and texture of the plant materials depicted in historic photographs or records that are representative of Olmsted's plan.
5. Site and install the selected plant materials; refer to Olmsted's directions for tree planting for Sudbrook. Replace with good topsoil any soil that is inferior.

The following guidelines are proposed to preserve, restore and enhance the Sudbrook Park landscape. They are intended to be mandatory for Sudbrook's triangles and the Sudbrook Stream Valley Park, and recommended for residents with respect to their individual properties:

LANDSCAPING GUIDELINES

1. Plant groups should contain an assemblage of hardwood trees and understory plantings which are:
 - Informal and naturalistic in appearance—as if the grouping "just happened" and was not a conscious positioning of plants.
 - Asymmetrical in total form.
2. Individual plants should be subordinated to the whole group and not draw attention to themselves.
3. Generally, a multiple number of like species should be used within groups rather than using a single plant of a species. Group plantings that are a display of dissimilar single species are not part of the natural landscape.
4. Plants within a group should vary in size and height. This can be attained by using varying maturity plants of the same species, or by using compatible different species that by their natural growth habit form differing heights and widths, creating a stepped down effect. (Shrubs planted under and amongst low growing trees, and low growing trees under tall trees form this layering effect).
5. The edge of plant groups should be curved and/or serpentine rather than follow a straight line.
6. Plant groups should vary in size within the total landscape.

7. The ground of open, meadow-like areas and tree groves should be planted with grass.
8. The ground under groups of low branching trees or low shrubbery should be covered with ground cover.
9. Distracting items should not interfere with the total scene. Unusual, exotic or uniquely formed plants, flower beds and extremely unlike plants used in a group disrupt the tranquil and subtle, but powerful, concept intended by Olmsted.
10. The overall color of the landscape should be the green of the plantings against the blue background of the sky. Red and yellow are not to be prevalent in the summer landscape.
11. The materials, construction, and forms of all paths, benches, playground equipment, drinking fountains, stone property markers, lighting, historic markers, access roads, and other landscape elements should be governed by a naturalistic concept, being harmonious with and inconspicuous in the total landscape scene.
12. Formal planting is not a part of Sudbrook's public landscape concept, and the following formalistic characteristics should be avoided:
 - Sculptured or exotic plants.
 - Vividly colored plants and flowers.
 - In line planting (species in a straight line).
 - Geometric plant arrangements.
 - Symmetrical grouping of plants.
 - Equal height and size plants.
 - Display planting (such as flower beds or gardens).
 - Many dissimilar types of plants in a group, or the use of many single species within a group.
 - Any plant or item that is so individualistic that it draws attention to itself.
 - Plants marginally adaptive to the Sudbrook Park area.
 - Use of stone or wood chip beds.
 - Use of edge stripping material to border areas.

Understanding and implementing Olmsted's theory of landscape architecture in public spaces is essential to preserve the historic qualities of Sudbrook Park. Hopefully, residents will undertake this responsibility with enthusiasm.

These guidelines are a part of the Sudbrook Park Community Plan, adopted April 5, 1999 by the Baltimore County Council.