

communiqué /press release**For immediate release****CCA Casts a Modern Eye on Century-Old Utopian Sites in *Viewing Olmsted: Photographs by Robert Burley, Lee Friedlander, and Geoffrey James*****Third Exhibition in "The American Century" Series Surveys the Vision of Frederick Law Olmsted, North America's Pre-Eminent Landscape Architect**

Montréal, 16 October 1996 — On 16 October 1996, the Canadian Centre for Architecture opens ***Viewing Olmsted: Photographs by Robert Burley, Lee Friedlander, and Geoffrey James***, an exhibition of 160 pictures drawn from the results of an extraordinary seven-year commission. David Harris of the CCA Photographs Collection supervised the commission and curated the exhibition. The photographs on view offer visitors an opportunity to understand and reflect upon the achievement of Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), North America's most important landscape architect, by looking at his city parks, private estates, cemeteries, and subdivisions through the eyes of three visual artists.

"This photographic commission, the most important ever undertaken by the CCA, was meant to explore the present state of Olmsted's sites," notes Paolo Costantini, Curator of the CCA Photographs Collection, "from Central Park in New York and the Emerald Necklace in Boston to the Stanford campus, Mountain View Cemetery, and Yosemite in California. At the same time, this project reflects on the transformations that have occurred over the past century – not only in the complex environmental systems that Olmsted designed, but also in our concept of the park and what it means to a profoundly changed society."

On view through 2 February 1997, ***Viewing Olmsted*** is the third exhibition in the multi-year series **The American Century**, organized by Phyllis Lambert, Director of the CCA. The series seeks to cast a fresh eye on critical aspects of modern America's architectural culture – its promises and disappointments, its roots and offshoots, its unparalleled worldwide impact.

"The enormous physical and social changes in North American cities over the course of this century have been encompassed in ***Viewing Olmsted***," according to Phyllis Lambert, "not overtly, but in the way the photographers have experienced Olmsted's landscapes. We invited these artists to work over time on all the sites so they might become intimately familiar with the language of Olmsted and allow the parks to speak to

them. They witnessed how the sites change from season to season through the years – and the photographers' point of view changed with them. We hope our visitors, too, will immerse themselves in the many aspects of Olmsted's work as evoked by the shifting, multiple viewpoints of these artists, so that the onlookers, too, come to be transformed in their ways of seeing these parks."

In its size and complexity, CCA's Olmsted commission belongs to a tradition that includes such great photographic projects as the 1851 Mission héliographique, which documented architecture throughout France. "The American photographers of Olmsted's time did not have the government as a patron or Chartres cathedral as a subject," Phyllis Lambert notes. "Instead, they had the sponsorship of the railroads and the dramatic vistas of the West. Our commission harks back in a way to those 19th-century images of the American landscape, but with an important difference. Olmsted's landscapes are made ones and are for the most part *urban*. They bring a quintessentially American conception of nature into the heart of the city."

The artists had the opportunity to visit the sites many times, returning to photograph them in different seasons, or sometimes in the same season several years later. Olmsted scholar Cynthia Zaitzevsky selected 74 representative sites for the project and provided documentation to the photographers about each. Out of the resulting work, the CCA chose 940 photographs to become part of a permanent archive. The exhibition **Viewing Olmsted** is the public's first opportunity to see a wide-ranging selection of these images.

The photographers brought sharply different approaches to the commission. Lee Friedlander (U.S.A., born 1934) working in black and white, used a Leica at first, but changed to a 2¼" square Hasselblad, and a panoramic camera. Geoffrey James (U.K., born 1942) also worked in black and white, using a panoramic camera and later an 8" x 10" view camera. Robert Burley (Canada, born 1957) created chromogenic color prints, using a 4" x 5" view camera. The photographers' personal visions and their ideas about Olmsted were equally distinct, evolving over the course of the commission.

"As a result of being able to return to the parks over a period of years," Robert Burley notes, "I found out that they are constantly reinvented places – not just through the change of seasons and the different activities that take place in them, but through Olmsted's skills as a designer. He had an immense talent for manipulating not only the landscape but also the way people experience the landscape. Being a picture-maker, one tries to be aware of how people view your photographs and how you can move their eyes around an image. I think Olmsted was incredibly successful in moving me through his landscapes. Even when I was very aware of it and tried to find alternative routes, I found myself following the itinerary he had developed."

Geoffrey James also draws a parallel between Olmsted's crafting of space and the work of the photographer: "You find a spot in which you have a relationship to things around you, and you put your camera down and make a picture. You're not peering through the machine, you're just walking – sort of sniffing, like a dog trying to find the right spot. I found there were places that seemed to me to have been consciously designed to make you walk like that, to move your body through the space. There is a journey to be made – almost a narrative."

The challenge of rendering the implied movement within these spaces; the continual changing of the landscape with the seasons and the weather; the sheer size of the places – because of these factors, the sites needed to be interpreted, from multiple, overlapping points of view. As Lee Friedlander puts it, "I don't think anyone is capable of doing the definitive Central Park. That's why Bob and Geoffrey and I all felt reassured to think, 'If I don't do justice to this or that site, somebody else will.' Going out with them was fun, because you could have tied any two of us back-to-back, and each one would have been totally interested in the area he was photographing. I don't think there was ever a time when we went out together and were interested in the same thing. But then, we'd go out independently and wind up photographing the same tree. To me, that's part of what justifies the commission – the feeling that Olmsted had a reason for putting that tree where it was, and the reason was going to come out in the pictures."

Friedlander tended to explore the different ways in which the camera can record the play of light and shadow and the character of a space; in photographs that sometimes resemble dense, visually disorienting collages, he investigated how a slight difference in viewing position, or a change in camera format, can radically alter one's experience of a place. Burley was drawn to the interplay of public and private space within the parks – to the ways in which they allow people to enjoy a personal, psychological envelope within the physical landscape; he also became interested in the way a fixed, relatively timeless element (such as a bridge) would be juxtaposed with plantings that changed day by day, providing a field in which human activity would change by the minute. James, who has devoted much of his career to photographing Italian gardens, was most caught up in rendering the physical sensation of moving through the sites, which are so different in character from formal European gardens.

"The photographers whose work is gathered here have given us different places than those that Olmsted made," writes John Szarkowski, Director Emeritus of the Department of Photography of The Museum of Modern Art, New York; "but their aim was in a sense perhaps similar to his; both he and they have given us places that we complete by entering into them – in the first case physically, and in the second, imaginatively... One might say that Robert Burley sees the parks as artifacts, and that Geoffrey James sees them as ancient farms in decline, and that Lee Friedlander sees them as jungles dreaming of civilization."

Catalogue Published by the CCA Reviews and Comments On the Commission

In conjunction with the exhibition, the CCA will publish a book-length report on the commission, featuring a prologue by Phyllis Lambert; essays by Paolo Costantini and John Szarkowski, Director Emeritus of the Department of Photography of The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and 64 photographs from the exhibition. The book also will include interviews with the three photographers, conducted by David Harris, and an appendix listing the sites that were photographed.

Reviewing the History of Montréal's Olmsted Park

Concurrent with **Viewing Olmsted**, the CCA also presents **Mount Royal Res Publica**, an exhibition focusing on the public's involvement in preserving Montréal's mountain park. Organized for the CCA by guest curator Dinu Bumbaru of Héritage Montréal, the exhibition is on view in the hallcases of the CCA from 16 October 1996 to 16 February 1997. Featuring plans, drawings, photographs, and documents drawn from the CCA's archives and other collections, the exhibition explores the debates that have surrounded public use of Mount Royal as the symbol and backdrop of Montréal. The initiative to preserve the public interest in the mountain by establishing a park – a proposal fulfilled by Olmsted between 1873 and 1871 – was just one stage in the history of the public's involvement with this site, which has continued to this day.

A Wide-Ranging Schedule of Programs for the Public

An ambitious public program has been organized by the CCA in conjunction with **Viewing Olmsted**. Developed in association with several distinguished Montréal organizations, the programs include guided tours of the exhibition, student workshops at the CCA and on Mount Royal, lectures and a public forum, a film series, and walking tours of the Parc du Mont-Royal and other historic Montréal parks and gardens. For information on Olmsted programs at the CCA, please call (514) 939-7026. These programs grow out of a principle central to the CCA's mission: the notion that architecture, as part of the social and natural environment, is a public concern. The exhibition **Viewing Olmsted** offers an excellent opportunity to serve this principle, provoking reflection on the multiplicity of ways in which we can view our landscape; the role of the citizen in maintaining and protecting this legacy; and the physical, economic, and political structures that can make citizens central to their city.

Viewing Olmsted On Tour

After being seen at the CCA, **Viewing Olmsted** will travel to the Equitable Gallery in New York City (12 February to 15 March 1997); to the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio (9 May to 10 August 1997); to the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts (2 September to 30 November 1997) and to the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (1 March to 26 April 1998). From May 1998 to April 2000, a smaller exhibition of approximately 85 images will circulate internationally.

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Information: www.cca.qc.ca/press