

Arboriculture in Its Relations to Landscape: “All That Would Be Fair Must Be Fit”

Charles Eliot

Charles Eliot had been told repeatedly by his father and Frederick Law Olmsted that he possessed a gift for expression that should be used, and so he made writing for the press a part of his profession. At a meeting of the New York Farmers, 19 January 1892, the evening's subject was arboriculture for the farm, the village, and the highway. The paper that Eliot read on that occasion encapsulates several of his chief principles for landscape design as applied to the use of trees.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,— Arboriculture is a long word and a long subject. I suppose it is the whole science and art of growing trees for timber, for firewood, for shelter, for the prevention of destructive erosion, and last but not least, for the beauty of trees individually and in masses. I must, of course, choose some one section of this wide field; and so I shall, by your leave, give my time to a brief discussion of arboriculture in its relations with landscape—meaning by the term “landscape” the visible surroundings of men's lives on the surface of the earth.

It sometimes seems as if beauty in the surroundings of life were not appreciated, or even desired, here in our America. The man who goes so far as to paint his house and to “fix up” his place is reviled as a “dude” in many parts of our country. A certain brave scorn of beauty seems to characterize most of the people of our new West.

On the other hand we see, when we come to study the matter, that if the experience of the past counts for anything, there is a power in beauty which works for joy and for good as nothing else in this naughty world does or can. And when we come to see this clearly, we are at once compelled to abandon our indifference and to substitute therefor the eager desire of old Plato, “that our youth might dwell in a land of health amid fair sights and sounds.” Alas, that “fair sights” do not spring up spontaneously around

our modern lives as they seem to have done in the Old World. In the long settled corners of Europe, men's fields, lanes, roads, houses, churches, and even whole villages and towns, seem to combine with nature to produce scenery of a more lovable type than nature working alone can offer us. With us the contrary is too often the fact. Our buildings, fences, highways, and railroads, not to speak of our towns, are often scars which mar the face of nature without possessing any compensating beauty of their own. It is evident that beauty in the surroundings of life is not to be had in this modern day without taking thought, and exercising vigilance. And our thought and our vigilance must be rightly directed, or it will defeat our purpose. Many a man, becoming suddenly conscious of a desire for beauty, has attempted to attain his heart's wish by forbidden and impossible ways. Thus country roadsides have been “slicked up” until all beauty has been “slicked” out of them. Noble growths of native trees have fallen victims to the desire for the beauty of exotics. Village mansions of the dignified old style have given place to the frivolities which are named for Queen Anne. Trim formal flower gardens have been rooted up to make way for the modern gardener's curves and scattered beds. Men seem slow to learn the truth of the old saying, “All's fair that's fit,” or that corollary thereof which best expresses the truth of my subject, “All that would be fair must be fit.”

This is the principle which ought to govern us in our tree-planting as well as in all else which affects the scenery of our lives. Fields, lanes, and roads should be laid out so as to fulfil the requirements of convenience, while conforming to the facts of topography. Buildings should be designed so as to fulfil and express their several purposes. Ground about buildings should be similarly and straightforwardly adapted to the uses and enjoyments of real life, with no regard to any fanciful or a priori notions of what such ground should look like or contain. So when we come to the most effective means of modifying the scenery about us, the felling, preserving, or planting of trees, our principle will constrain us to cut, and save, and plant for good reasons only, and not from consideration for mere passing fashion or foolish love of display.

Let me illustrate this fundamental principle by briefly noting the main points in regard to the way in which trees and shrubs have been used in a typical New England valley where the eyes of the inhabitants have been opened. I shall describe nothing imaginary, although I may put together things which are to be seen in two or three separate places.

Of course we arrive at our valley by the railroad; and the railroad banks themselves herald the approach to our station, for behold, they are actually planted! Not with Forsythias and Japan Quinces,—how absurd such plants would look upon these gravel banks,—but with shrubby Cinquefoil, Dyer's Greenweed, Bayberry, Sweet Fern, and other humble, but tough and hardy plants. When we reach the station, we find not only a decent unpretentious building with substantial platforms, and neat driveways and gravel spaces, but also a fair spread of grass with three or four great Sugar Maples for shade—a contrast, indeed, to the usual North American station-yard, which commonly resembles a cattle-pen more than anything else; a contrast also to that other type of station ground in which the station master sets out Geraniums supplied by the company, although the fundamental separation of grass-land from gravel space has not yet been made.

From the railroad platform we at once command a view of our valley. The village, with a

mill or two, lies below us at the mouth of a gap in the northern hills. Southward the valley widens to contain a fresh green intervalle. Opposite us the west wall of the valley is an irregular steep slope of rising woods with numerous hill farms scattered along the more level heights above. The eastern wall upon which we stand consists below the railroad of a long and dense wood, and, above the tracks, of rolling and airy uplands which have been occupied by city men for country houses. The central intervalle, the flanking woods, the village gathered at the valley's head, the whole scene before us possesses unity and beauty to a degree which interests us at once. And how was this delightful general effect produced? Simply by intelligent obedience to the requirements of human life in this valley. The village was placed where it is for the sake of using the great water power which rushes from the gap in the hills. The intervalle was cleared and smoothed for raising perfect hay. The steep side-hills have been maintained in woods because they are too steep for agriculture, and because if they were cleared of trees, their sands and gravels would be washed down upon the fertile land of the intervalle. It is in such ways as these that the every-day forces of convenience, use, and economy conspire to produce beauty, and beauty of a higher and more satisfying type than that which founds itself upon caprice, or pomp, or fashion.

The truth of all this is well illustrated by the details as well as by the total effect of the valley before us. If we descend towards the village, we find the footpath leaving the highway, and following a swift brook down through the wood, while the road, in order to find an easier grade, makes a long zigzag through the woods to the south. Trees and bushes crowd the sides of the road thus freed from the stiff accompanying sidewalk, while the footpath gains exemption from the dust of the road, and has all the beauty of the brookside in addition. We learn incidentally that all this wooded slope is the property of the township, that it is called the Town Wood, and that it was the gift of some of the men who live above the railroad.

At the foot of the slope, footpath and highway join again, and proceed across the level valley as

a straight village street, adorned with rows of trees, and broad grass strips, and sidewalks which conform themselves to the slight ups and downs of the ground. Here is just as much stiffness and straightness as is necessary and fitting, and not a bit more. Here is no mimicking of the curbs, and the strict grades which are necessities only in city streets. Here, also, the street trees are neither Ginkgoes, nor Koelreuterias, nor Magnolias, but American Elms.

In the heart of the village we find a town square planted with Elms in symmetrical rows. Fronting on the square is the town hall,—a respectable building,—and back of it rises a steep rocky slope with a high rock at the top, where a bonfire burns every 4th of July. The rocky bank has recently been planted with Pines and Hemlocks, which in a few years will make a dense, dark background for the town hall. Then straight away south from the hall and the square runs the broad main street of the town, an avenue of Rock Maples, young as yet, but promising a noble vista in twenty years or less; for the southern end of the long avenue opens upon the sunny meadows of the intervale, so that a man standing in the public square will look under the boughs of the trees away to the south for miles. Until lately there was a barn standing in the line of this vista and hiding the open intervale. The removal of the barn by a public-spirited man has established the permanence of the outlook, because the lands beyond are so moist that they can never be built upon.

I should like to speak of the generally sensible and simple planting of the house grounds, of the good specimen trees in the yard of the principal school, of the fine gorge above the gap in the hills, where the mill company has preserved the woods for the protection they afford to the canal and its retaining-banks, of the way in which the intelligent preservation of trees along even the tiniest brooks of the neighboring hill farms has resulted in unusual beauty of farm scenery, as well as in the prevention of that extravagant washing away of soil which results from carrying ploughing to the edges of watercourses. All through this district it is most interesting to note how beauty has resulted from the exercise of common sense and intelligence.

When we turn the other way, and climb the hill above the railroad station, we find a charming winding road, the sides of which are irregularly overgrown with trees, shrubs, climbers, and herbaceous plants. The footpath is there; but it dodges in and out, and goes here below a knoll and there on top, and does not stick to the roadside like a city sidewalk by any manner of means. Every now and then we pass the entrance of some city man's country estate,—there must be a dozen or twenty such estates in this fine hillside,—and in the course of a summer afternoon we make the round of them. Presumably all these gentlemen have distinctly intended to preserve or create beauty in the surroundings of their country homes. It is very interesting to see the several methods they have followed, and the various results obtained. Some of these estates seem very beautiful to us, while others are far less interesting. After allowing for all differences of natural opportunity, can any general reason for this contrast in results be found? It is obvious at once that the most beautiful of these places are not those upon which the most money has been spent, not those in which natural conditions have been most completely revolutionized, not those which display the greatest number of kinds of trees, shrubs, and herbs, not those in which the gardener has scattered flower beds in all directions. After studying these places it is plain that the most beautiful are those in which the general arrangement, and the saving and planting of trees, have been made to depend upon those same considerations of convenience, easiness, and fitness which we found produced the beauty of the valley. Arboriculture, when it is practised to produce timber, to prevent erosion, or to form collections of all growable species, is an interesting and noble occupation for mind and for capital; but when it is practised to enhance the beauty of the scenery of every-day life, it must consent to be guided by that keen feeling for fitness which is the essence of what is called good taste.