LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE DEFINED

What is *landscape architecture*, when did it have its beginning as a profession, and how is it defined? In an undated letter from Henry Hill Elliot, one of the New York City street commissioners, to the city council, the designers of Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, were appointed “landscape architects and designers.” According to Olmsted’s biographers, Charles E. Beveridge and David Schuyler, “this [letter, written some time in 1860] is the first instance [they] have found of the use of the term ‘landscape architects’ to describe Olmsted and Vaux’s professional design activity” (Beveridge and Schuyler, 1983, p. 267). Prior to that time, *landscape gardening* was the most widely accepted term used for the creative activity in which Olmsted was to engage for half a century.

Three years later, on May 12, 1863, Olmsted and Vaux used the term *landscape architect* for the first time in a letter of resignation to the New York Park Commission—due to the intolerable political interference they were made to endure in the course of developing their grand “greensward” plan for Central Park. This was the first official documented use in America of that professional title. It is also thought to have been used casually in Great Britain at an earlier time. But that was in personal correspondence rather than in connection with an official communiqué between professionals and their client.

Calvert Vaux was satisfied with the title *landscape architect;* Olmsted was not but consented to its use for lack of a more suitable term. Vaux said, “I think it is the art title we want to set art out ahead & make it command its position . . .” Similarly, Horace William Shaler Cleveland, a friend of Olmsted’s and practicing landscape architect, resisted calling himself or his profession by that name, opting instead for *landscape engineer* or *landscape designer.* Yet in 1870 he wrote his superb little book, *Landscape Architecture as Applied to the Wants of the West.*

A century later, in 1971, Norman T. Newton, wrote in *Design on the Land* that landscape architecture is “the art—or the science, if preferred—of arranging land, together with the spaces and objects upon it, for safe, efficient, healthful, pleasant human use” (Newton, p. xxi). This was followed in 1977 by the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) which defined landscape architecture as:

*a science and an art [which] embraces those professional activities relating to the systematic planning of land areas, the design of outdoor places and spaces, the conservation of our natural*
resources and the creation of a more useful, safe and pleasant living environment.

(ASLA Handbook of Professional Practice, 1981, p. 19)

Six years later, on November 18, 1983, the following expanded definition was adopted by the trustees of the ASLA:

Landscape architecture is the profession which applies artistic and scientific principles to the research, planning, design and management of both natural and built environments. Practitioners of this profession apply creative and technical skill and scientific, cultural and political knowledge in the planned arrangement of natural and constructed elements on the land with a concern for the stewardship and conservation of natural, constructed and human resources. The resulting environments shall serve useful, aesthetic, safe and enjoyable purposes.

Landscape architecture may, for the purposes of landscape preservation, development and enhancement, include: investigation, selection, and allocation of land and water resources for appropriate use; feasibility studies; formulation of graphic and written criteria to govern the planning and design of land construction programs; preparation, review and analysis of master plans for land use and development; production of overall site plans, landscape grading and landscape drainage plans, irrigation plans, planting plans, and construction details; specification; cost estimates and reports for land development; collaboration in the design of roads, bridges, and structures with respect to the functional and aesthetic requirements of the area on which they are to be placed; negotiation and arrangement for execution of land area projects; field observation and inspection of land area construction, restoration and maintenance.


The International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) defines the landscape architect as one whom:

plants and designs the aesthetic layout of land areas for such projects as parks and other recreational facilities, roads, commercial, industrial and residential sites and public buildings; consults with clients, engineers and architects on overall programme; studies site conditions such as nature of soil
vegetation, rock features, drainage and location of buildings; designs landscape, harmonizing improvements with existing land features and buildings and proposed structures; prepares working drawings, specifications and cost estimates for landscaping, including vegetation to be planted and other related site development work; supervises landscaping to ensure that work is carried out according to specifications. The Landscape Architect may specialize in a particular type of landscape architecture such as parks landscaping.

(IFLA Yearbook, 1989, p. 26)
Source: Mann, William A.

Landscape Architecture: An Illustrated History in Timelines, Site Plans and Biography.
New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993