Hidden in Olmsted's Shadow: The Brilliant Designer History Forgot

Author: Yaniv Korman in Essay — Featured Articles —

Primary topic: Drawing Topics: Alexander Joseph Scholtes — Authorship — Drawing — Frederick Law Olmsted — History — Landscape Architecture — Representation — Yaniv Korman —

Perspective view showing peristyle for Kentucky Female Orphan School, Midway, Lexington, Kentucky, 1936.

It was 2 AM, and I was still scrolling through thousands of digitized drawings in the Olmsted archive on Flickr. Six hours in, my avocado toast sat half-eaten, but I couldn't pull myself away. These hand-drawn plans

Yaniv Korman

were so much more alive than the sterile digital renderings that I have gotten so used to seeing everywhere and become our industry standard.

As I looked closer, I noticed patterns: different handwriting styles, unique ways of drawing trees and figures. The work of many different people, all contributing to what we think of as “Olmsted” designs. In the bottom corners were small title blocks listing the draftsman’s initials.

Those initials would lead me to one of the most talented, yet almost completely forgotten, designers in American landscape architecture.

The Olmsted Empire’s Hidden Army

Since 1857 the Olmsted design legacy produced over 200,000 drawings across 6,000 projects, transforming American landscape architecture. Founding works like Central Park, Prospect Park, and Boston’s Emerald Necklace were led by Frederick Law Olmsted in partnership with Calvert Vaux and others. In the decades that followed, his sons carried the vision forward through the Olmsted Brothers firm, with senior associates who later took over leadership and continued the firm until its closure in 1980, broadening the practice’s influence nationwide.

As demand grew in the early 20th century, the firm’s staff reached up to 60 at its height in the 1920s, with designers and draftsmen producing the drawings that brought the firm’s vision to life. Throughout this expansion

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Plan and perspective view of Popp Memorial, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1933.

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and the firm's nearly 100-year existence, not a single woman was ever hired as a landscape architect or designer. Women worked in the separate clerical wing, their potential design talents never considered. Although designers, draftsmen, and operational staff alike made essential contributions, most of these talented individuals, regardless of gender or role, have been forgotten by history.

Over the past ten years, the National Park Service has been scanning and uploading these extraordinary drawings. By studying this collection obsessively (as my friends would describe it), I came to recognize the hidden hands behind them. I noticed that plans and sections with vibrant pencil colors were often drawn by L.H.Z., while billowy lettering and puffy tree foliage were produced by C.R.W. However, the most extraordinary drawings always had the same initials: A.J.S.

Three Small Letters

Employees at the Olmsted Brothers firm, 1917;
A.J.S. standing at the right corner.

I first noticed A.J.S. in a set of drawings commissioned by William Tudor Gardiner. There were breathtaking perspectives of a swimming pool nestled in foliage. In the foreground, the two trees that framed the view had just enough shading to capture the trembling of the leaves, while the image was made with complementary lettering that seemed to be flourishing across the page.

The title block listed the drawing as “Approved by C.R.P.,” but tucked in the corner among the graphite foliage were three small letters: A.J.S.

I searched the archive for drawings tagged with those initials, and hundreds appeared. They all shared a distinctive style that defied conventional drafting rules. Up close, the vegetation looked like “noodle soup scribbles,” quick, chaotic marks that seemed rushed. But zooming out revealed compositions of superb clarity and control, where every mark contributed to spatial depth and white space balanced perfectly with graphite. The architecture followed perspective rules precisely, and the lettering was diaphanous.

Perspective view of swimming pool for William Tudor Gardiner, 1939.

The Hunt for a Name

Finding the initials was thrilling, but initials don't tell you who someone was, how they lived, or why they disappeared. I needed a name, and that meant diving deeper into the archives.

I searched for an Olmsted employee with these initials but couldn't find any more information. I looked again at the drawings for more clues until I found a series of spectacular drawings for James R. Neal's estate in River Oaks, Houston. There, hidden along a road in the bottom corner, I finally found A.J.S's family name spelled out: Scholtes.

I turned to the Olmsted Associates records at the Library of Congress. At first, I found only a file for "A.G. Scholtes," but the error came from a miswritten letter. Later correspondence confirmed the name: Alexander Joseph Scholtes. With this name, I was able to find his son's obituary and then locate his grandson, Christopher Scholtes.

Perspective study sketch for bird's-eye view of garden rendering for Neal J. Robert, Houston, Texas, 1933.

Final bird's-eye view of garden for Neal J. Robert,
Houston, Texas, 1933.

“Grandpa was a man of few words,” Christopher told me on a cross-Atlantic phone call. “I knew he played the trombone and was a member of the local church,” he said, “but unfortunately I never saw any of his drawings.”

The Life Behind the Initials

Alexander Joseph Scholtes was born in South Boston, the son of two German immigrants. His father was a cabinet maker, while his mother was a devoted Christian who sent Alexander to a German parochial school. There, his teacher noticed Alexander’s drawing skills and helped him secure a spot at the MIT School of Architecture, from which he graduated in 1903.

Unlike other designers at the Olmsted firm who had family members working in the landscape industry or came from more affluent backgrounds, Alexander had to work industriously to support his wife, her daughter from her first marriage, and his own two children.

In addition to his work as a draftsman, he took on freelance work as an architect, designing many local buildings. Over the years, Scholtes applied multiple times to work as an architecture professor and architect at various institutions.

Recommendation letters revealed both Alexander's genius and his tragedy. James F. Dawson called him "one of the finest designers of classical architecture" he'd ever worked with, while another recommendation letter praised his "sensitive feeling for architectural forms." But the same letters exposed his Achilles' heel: "a certain shyness and timidity and lack of ready self-assertion."

In a profession that rewards self-promotion and client confidence, Alexander's quietness proved costly. When he applied in 1933 for a job as an architect in Washington, his former boss at the Olmsted Brothers mentioned that he was very much in need of the job, hinting at financial difficulties. Scholtes was an artist of exceptional talent who couldn't translate his gifts into professional success.

"He never charged a lot of money for his work," Alexander's grandson explained, confirming what I had already figured out from the rest of the letters in Scholtes's personal files.

Despite the warm recommendations, Scholtes did not get the jobs he applied for and remained invisible. He didn't lack talent. He lacked a system that knew how to see it.

A Larger Pattern

View from pergola to enclosed garden for Neal J. Robert, Houston, Texas, 1933.

Scholtes wasn't alone. His disappearance reflects a wider truth about the profession's evolution. While other designers like Leon H. Zach, James F. Dawson, and Charles R. Wait eventually received recognition, many talented employees disappeared from the record during the shift from individual artisans to collaborative firms.

As the field became more complex and team-driven, names gave way to initials. Credit became collective. People who did not know how to push themselves above others, or who did not have the right connections, did not get promotions. But even though these talented draftsmen did not receive the fame they deserved, their drawings survived to teach us important lessons about design process and the value of individual vision within collaborative work.

What We're Rediscovering in the Digital Age

Scholtes's story feels particularly relevant as contemporary practice rediscovers the value of hand drawing in design. Recent studies confirm

what many practitioners instinctively know: hand sketches often produce better design alternatives in less time, revealing something fundamental about how we think through complex problems.

When Scholtes made each mark with his pencil, he couldn't undo it with Ctrl + Z. This constraint forced intentionality. His "noodle soup scribbles" weren't accidents but deliberate choices about emphasis and imagination.

Today's leading landscape architects are now encouraging designers to pick up tracing paper and pencils at project start, recognizing how hand drawings improve team communication and reveal spatial possibilities that screens cannot match.

The revival coincides with studios finally crediting individual contributors, featuring entire teams rather than hiding talent behind firm names. These collaborative studios understand that attribution is not just courtesy but how a profession honors diverse talent and prevents future disappearances like Scholtes's.

The Last Drawing

It's 2 AM again, six years after I first discovered those initials, and I'm still scrolling through the archives. But this time, I'm not hunting for excellent drawings. I'm collecting the stories of the people who made them.

On my screen glows a June 1936 perspective that Scholtes created for the Female Orphan School in Midway, Kentucky. Three graceful figures stand in the distance in front of a peristyle court, their forms suggested with just enough strokes to convey dignity and hope. In the corner, a quick detail study of a Corinthian column (my favorite order) shows Scholtes's commitment to both artistic vision and technical knowledge.

His initials are there too, in the shadow of the rightmost corner of the grass.

In an era where AI can generate renderings in seconds and algorithms design our parks, Alexander's hidden signatures ask us a fundamental question: Are we building a profession that celebrates human creativity, or one that erases it?

Alexander Joseph Scholtes was a master who died unknown. His grandson never saw his drawings. His colleagues forgot his name. But his pencil strokes survived, waiting in archives for someone to notice their brilliance.

We have a choice: continue the pattern that made Alexander invisible, prioritizing efficiency over artistry, noise over nuance, and speed over thoughtfulness, or build a profession that creates space for different kinds of brilliance to emerge.

Perspective view showing peristyle for Kentucky Female Orphan School, Midway, Lexington, Kentucky, 1936.

The signatures are there, waiting in the corners of our drawings. The question is: Will we bother to look?

**Courtesy of the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, unless otherwise noted.*

The Olmsted Archives are available digitally through the National Park Service and Flickr.

Topics in this article: Alexander Joseph Scholtes — Authorship — Drawing — Frederick Law Olmsted — History — Landscape Architecture — Representation — Yaniv Korman —

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- **Rob Whitaker** says:
  August 14, 2025 at 10:11 pm

  I enjoyed this very much Yaniv, appreciate your research.

  Reply
- **Ieva** says:
  August 18, 2025 at 8:13 am

  Thank you, thank you, thank you…!
  Thank you for bringing up this topic and highlighting it. Thank you for revealing the quiet geniuses.
  Being in the field of Landscape Architecture and observing the direction of its visual design aesthetics, it feels as if we are driving ourselves into a “corner.” Copy-paste visualization

elements, predictable structures, and effects. How far will it go? Yet it is considered standard, and it works...
May this field come to value hand sketches and drawings, and highlight their added — human — qualities.
I will keep hoping...

Reply

- **Jennifer Birkeland** says:
  August 20, 2025 at 4:26 am

  Brilliant!

  Reply

- **Peter Sheard** says:
  August 20, 2025 at 4:50 pm

  Even after nearly 50 years as a landscape architect, I still use hand drawings and concept plans with markers to great effect. So it was a delight to see I am following in such glorious footsteps..truly inspirational and highly encouraging for a 'dinosaur' like myself.

  Reply

- **Stephen England** says:
  August 20, 2025 at 11:05 pm

Thank bueatiful tribute well deserved. Process that includes sketches is quick and powerful hope the profession recognizes the importance sketch studies bring to communicating.

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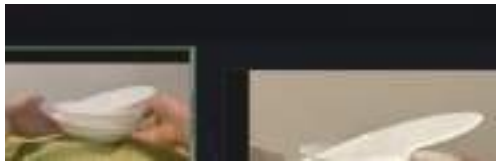

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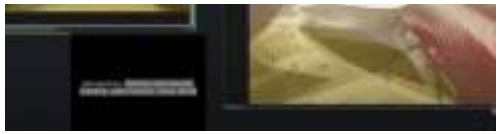

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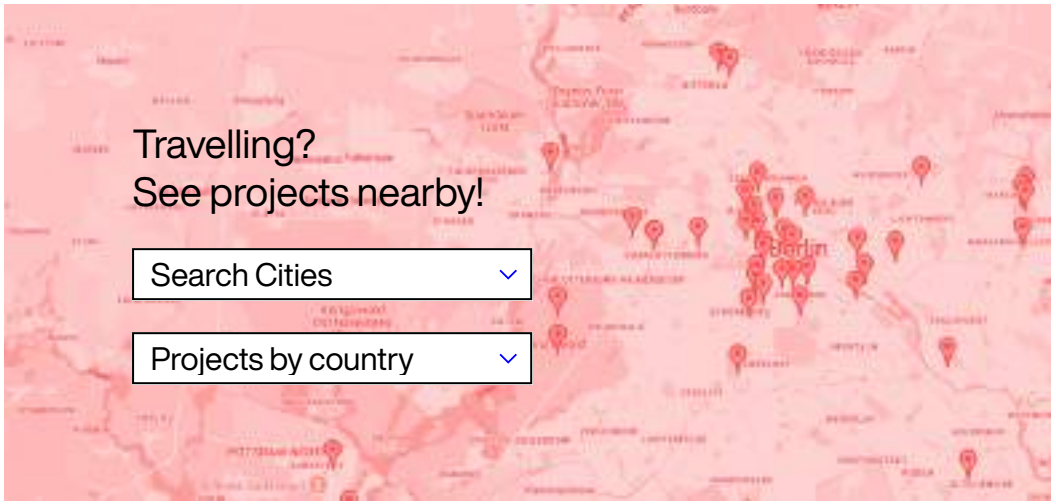

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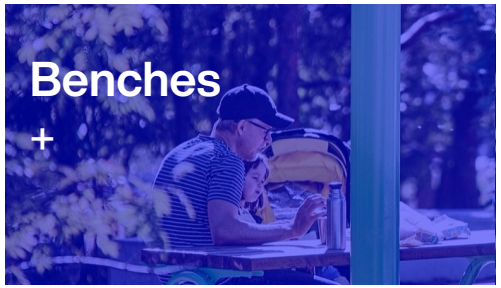

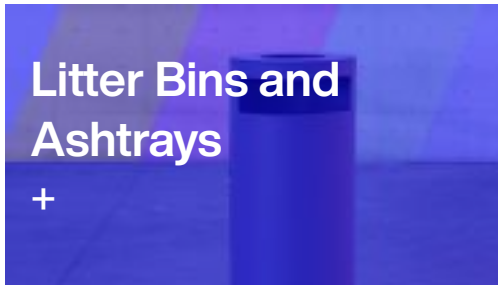

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