Capital's Utopia

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Introduction

In 1895, Pittsburgh steelmaster George Gibson McMurtry hired the renowned Boston landscape design firm of Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot to translate an elaborate urban vision into a design for a model industrial town. This town, to be called Vandergrift, would be built in southwestern Pennsylvania, about forty miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Captivated by George McMurtry’s ideas, John Charles Olmsted and Charles Eliot rendered a design reminiscent of the romantic upper-middle-class residential suburbs that their firm had created earlier in the nineteenth century for places like Riverside, Illinois, and Sudbrook, Maryland (fig. I.1). Graceful, curvilinear streets, tastefully arranged oriental trees and shrubs, a full complement of infrastructure, and a long list of restrictive covenants were meant to ensure that the new town of Vandergrift would live up to McMurtry’s expectations.

Less than a year into the planning process, McMurtry began to question Olmsted and Eliot about their design and, negotiating one design modification after another, altered the street layout, lot cadastre, park placement, and general land-use pattern. In the end, the enthusiasm that John Olmsted once had for the project waned so much that he did not want his family name to be linked with
Fig. I.1. Plan for Vandergrift by Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, 1896. (Plan reproduced courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, N.Y. Frederick Law Olmsted Architectural Drawings and Plans, file #462.)
McMurtry, however, went on with the scheme, building and marketing to his business partners and employees a greatly diluted version of the original Olmsted Vandergrift plan. By 1900, the urban settlement surrounding his firm’s new, fully integrated sheet-rolling steel mill had attracted a population of forty-three hundred. Like many North American urban spaces for which grand plans have been devised, the resulting landscape in which these residents lived and worked differed substantially in appearance from McMurtry’s original vision and, obviously, from Olmsted and Eliot’s first design. This book explains why.

The argument presented in this book rests on the idea that urban visions are seldom smoothly and inexorably translated into urban design and then into urban landscape—even when shepherded along by politically or economically powerful individuals. First, in a democratic capitalist society like the United States, the planning process is necessarily fraught with tension—between ideals that elevate (or demote) the common “public good” and ideals that strengthen (or weaken) the abilities of an individual or business entity to exercise their property rights. Plans can thus be modified before building occurs if government officials feel that the public good is not properly served or if the rights of individual property owners have been threatened. Citizens, too, theoretically have the right to comment upon the plans that have been made “on their behalf.” (I use the word *theoretically* because in the United States most planning decisions go uncontested—perhaps because they deal with quite mundane issues—or are challenged by individuals or groups who lack the power to effect change. Nevertheless, American urban history is punctuated by many notable cases where the public questioned plans and managed to have them modified, if not stopped altogether.)

Second, unless planners, developers, or government officials maintain strict and continued hegemonic control over the landscape after the plan has been translated into reality (or unless their plans have been codified into law), users may decide to do something different with the landscape than what was initially intended. There may be vast differences between the planner’s desired use of an urban space and what the public or private interests actually do in and to it.

Third, such after-the-fact modifications may necessitate (at least from the planner’s, developer’s or politician’s perspective) the imposition of additional rules and regulations regarding land use and public activities. Such rules may be enacted to keep the landscape true to the original plan; or they may be responses to unanticipated spin-off conditions and externality effects. Thus, public ver-
sus private debates, the ratcheting down over time of control by power brokers, developers, planners, and government, the extent and effectiveness of citizen participation, and unforeseen conditions can each dilute the initial intentions for an urban space. All of these diluting influences can shape how a place’s landscape and social community turn out.

Steelmaster George McMurtry, the Vandergrift founder, had much in common with Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., Daniel Burnham, and Robert Moses at the point in his career when he created an urban vision (and then an urban landscape) for his employees at Vandergrift. As we will see, he was above all a very skilled negotiator. His plans inspired other industrialists as well as members of his own workforce. He convinced his friends to contribute large sums of capital to carry out his projects. He created a very plausible marketing package for Vandergrift that confounded (if not masked) his company’s private intentions and “business considerations.” Nevertheless, there were limits to what McMurtry could do during each phase (conceptualization, surveying and building, settlement) of the Vandergrift project. In short, the business, technological, socio-political, and local contexts in which McMurtry and his Apollo Iron and Steel Company existed each constrained his ability to dominate Vandergrift. These contexts explain why McMurtry’s initial conceptualization for Vandergrift differed from the first Olmsted rendering and why both the McMurtry and Olmsted plans ultimately differed from the landscape and social community that eventually developed.

Pursuant to Earle’s arguments about the possibilities for “geographical history,” in this book I use numerous geographical concepts (and even a model or two) related to industrial restructuring theory to address a larger historiographic question that underpins Vandergrift’s creation: why did the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century U.S. labor movement have such difficulties achieving its objectives? I also directly examine the politics that surround the competing contemporary and historical interpretations that evolved for the town. In many instances, I also discuss the problems that I encountered with primary and secondary historical sources and acknowledge the ambiguities that they raise. An understanding of industrial restructuring as it occurred within the steel industry is required if one is to build—as Jack Owens suggested—an interpretation of Vandergrift that considers the social relations that had a such a decisive impact on urban design, landscape, and how the place eventually turned out as a social community.
The industrial restructuring that prompted McMurtry’s creation of Vandergrift’s plan and social community and the later modifications of it consisted of three components—one technological, another sociopolitical, and another managerial. Each could foster profound geographical transformations at many spatial scales (table I.1). Together, they created, modified, and caused the abandonment of production sites, industrial towns, and regions. Below I briefly explore each of these industrial changes and a few of their possible geographic outcomes.

In the iron and steel industries of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, technological changes amounted to the application of new or modified production technologies and production processes. This involved installing new equipment at sites where iron was produced and the implementation of more efficient production techniques. After the mid-1870s, these modifications were aimed at allowing manufacturers to produce specialty items or steel. Although the steelmaking process was similar in concept to iron making, it required dif-

Table I.1. Basic Components of Industrial Restructuring within Nineteenth-Century Iron- and Steelmaking Firms

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technological Change (application of new or modified production technologies and production processes)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Process innovation</td>
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<td>Installation of new equipment</td>
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<td>Rationalization (efficiency)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Sociopolitical Change (modification of the division of labor and social power structure within the production process)</th>
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<tr>
<td>New labor requirements → Workforce adjustments</td>
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<tr>
<td>(de-skilling and white-collarization)</td>
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<tr>
<td>New work rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restructured wage/social hierarchy</td>
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<td>New “social contracts” between capital and labor</td>
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<th>Managerial Change (reorganization of business enterprise)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Inclusion of partners and new investors</td>
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<td>Legal reconstitution of the firm</td>
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<td>Consolidation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creation of specialized departments, divisions, or subsidiary companies</td>
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<td>New chains of command within the firm</td>
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<td>New management policies</td>
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<td>New business linkages with suppliers, competitors, and buyers</td>
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fertent equipment. The large capital investments needed to place equipment in
the mills also encouraged many steelmakers to rationalize and standardize pro-
duction so as to speed the transformation of natural resources into steel goods.
Such changes dramatically altered the layout of production sites.7

Sociopolitical changes occurred within the iron and steel industry when firms
modified the division of labor and social power structure within the production
process. The makers of iron and steel adjusted their workforces to fit the over-
all labor requirements of the production process more closely. They also imple-
mented new work rules (work regimes), restructured wages, and tried to inter-
act with labor in ways that would reduce costs, improve efficiency, and prevent
strikes and other labor disputes from interrupting production. The impacts of
these changes spilled out of the production site to influence the social life, po-
litical atmosphere, demographic structure, and geography of industrial commu-
nities.8

Managerial change was an aspect of the reorganization of business enterprise.
Any one of a number of activities, or a combination of them, might lead to this
type of restructuring. It could occur if a firm sought inclusion of partners and
new investors; if it reconstituted the firm into an entity in which individual in-
vestors were not legally liable for financial loss; if it created specialized depart-
ments, divisions, or subsidiary companies; or if it developed new chains of com-
mand within the firm, initiated new management policies, or fostered new
linkages with suppliers, competitors, and buyers.9 Geographical shifts in the lo-
cation of production and management activities within industries and over large
regions reflected this sort of change.10

How industrial restructuring occurred historically and geographically in
southwestern Pennsylvania explains many things: the militancy of McMurtry’s
workers in the town of Apollo; McMurtry’s agenda of social control at Vander-
grift; the reasons why McMurtry hired the Olmsteds; the vast differences be-
tween McMurtry’s agenda and the Olmsted plan; why Vandergrift’s landscape
and social community came to life in ways that McMurtry did not fully antici-
pate; and the important role that Vandergrift’s skilled nonunion steelworkers
played in thwarting labor organization in southwestern Pennsylvania during the
1900s. The industrial restructuring process, however, did not occur smoothly
and inexorably. Business structures, production technologies, and labor relations
could remain quite stable for years at a time only to be suddenly and irrevoca-
bly changed within a short period. It is those sudden bursts of industrial re-
structuring activity that turn out to be quite significant to understanding Van-
dergrift. During those periods, McMurtry and his business partners needed to experiment, adjust, and adapt—or face the possibility of going out of business.

Two especially intense industrial restructuring phases occurred in southwestern Pennsylvania’s iron and steel industries during the late-nineteenth century. The first, between 1864 and 1874, involved local experimentation by local iron makers in tinplate production; the second, between 1883 and 1894, saw the rise of the southwestern Pennsylvania steel industry. These two phases significantly transformed landscape and social patterns within the Kiskiminetas Valley, the area in which McMurtry’s Apollo Iron and Steel Company operated. Part 1 of this book focuses on them as antecedents to the creation of Vandergrift.

Less than a century after McMurtry founded Vandergrift, in the mid-1980s, the town’s steel mill (like many others in southwestern Pennsylvania) was almost completely abandoned due to a late-twentieth-century phase of steel industry restructuring. With it came out-migration and a community sense of uncertainty. In the early 1990s, however, a local historic preservation movement emerged in Vandergrift to rejuvenate the town’s “collective memory” and “sense of place” and to help breath new life into the town’s economy. Successful though it may have been, this movement tended to downplay the impact that labor disputes had on Vandergrift’s foundation and early history. It privileged the fact that the Olmsted landscape firm designed the town. While such an emphasis on planning is understandable given Olmsted’s current national popularity and the town’s need to attract (or retain) investors who would restore houses and public buildings, such an interpretation makes the steel company and McMurtry’s motives seem quite altruistic.

As historian Jack Owens suggested to me in 1986, however, this altruistic interpretation runs parallel to another possible interpretation: when they created Vandergrift, McMurtry and Apollo Iron and Steel were subscribing to agendas of social control and economic profit. Thus labor relations are just as much an underlying theme in the creation of Vandergrift as is comprehensive urban planning. Part 2 of this book details not only McMurtry’s collaboration with the Olmsted firm but also traces the development of his social and economic agendas. Apollo Iron and Steel wanted, at the very least, to break even with the town-building project; at the most, it wanted to cultivate a docile nonunion workforce. To achieve both of these goals the company actively promoted homeownership at Vandergrift. As a consequence, Vandergrift differed from standard company towns in that it was intended as a real-estate venture.

Part 3 assesses the extent to which McMurtry and Apollo Iron and Steel suc-
ceeded in meeting their economic and social agendas for the town. Despite some of the criticisms that can be leveled at the town plan on aesthetic and engineering grounds, at least during the 1900s and 1910s, not only prominent members of the steel industry but also people in social-reform circles believed Vandergrift to be a model that manufacturers should emulate when dealing with labor. In their opinion, Vandergrift had grown to become capital’s utopia—a productive, compliant, and seemingly democratic landscape and social community that guaranteed corporate profit. Organized labor, however, following its experience during labor disputes in 1893, 1901, and 1909, saw the place quite differently.