Walk through the front archway at the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, and note how the dirt carriageway gently hugs an island grown wild with ferns, winged euonymous, and native barberry. In the middle, ivy runs up the rough and reddish trunk of a 90-foot Eastern hemlock. “Olmsted planted that soon after he bought the property in 1883,” park ranger Mark D. Swartz explained during a tour of the Brookline, Massachusetts, site. “He envisioned that it would eventually be a towering centerpiece that would command attention as people walked in.”

Some 131 years later, it does. Patient and persistent, Olmsted, A.M. 1864, LL.D. ’93, angled the archway toward the tree, not his house, and likely knew that in time the structure would be hidden by boughs and foliage. America’s most famous landscape architect (with two honorary degrees from Harvard) “believed the natural world was a powerful medicine,” Swartz added, “an antidote to the adverse effects of the manmade urban environment that was rapidly expanding during his lifetime.” Here, the eye, first caught by the tree, follows the curving drive as it disappears behind the hemlock. Though small, the landscape Olmsted sculpted around his home holds pathways lined with mountain laurel and local pudding stone, a solitary American elm set on the rolling lawn, rock stairs patchy with moss that lead to a shady hollow rich with vines, rhododendrons, cotoneasters, yews, and a shagbark hickory tree. All encouraged the same sense

Olmsted’s vision is alive and well at the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. Clockwise from top left: meandering paths; the age-old hemlock on the carriage way; his home, as of 1883; and the arched entrance to it all.
of playful exploration, of grand mystery in the “natural” world, that imbue New York’s Central and Prospect Parks, Boston’s Emerald Necklace, and his other public projects.

At 61, Olmsted was famous when he and his wife, Mary Cleveland Perkins Olmsted, bought the farmhouse, naming it “Fairsted.” He was so intent on having the place, which sat on nearly two lush and hilly acres, that he cut a purchase deal with the elderly sisters who owned it: they moved into a cottage his son designed at the edge of the property, to live rent-free for the rest of their lives.

Still recovering from his final political battles over Central Park, Olmsted was lured to Boston as much by what would become the Emerald Necklace as by his friends and collaborators, the architect H.H. Richardson, A.B. 1859, and botanist Charles Sprague Sargent, the first director of Harvard’s Arnold Arboretum. They both lived nearby, and Isabella Stewart Gardner soon moved in next door. She was already collecting the art that would later fill her Boston museum, adjacent to Olmsted’s earliest Boston project, the Back Bay Fens. There, he helped solve an engineering and public-health problem caused by chronic flooding and excess sewage. “He recreated a salt marsh that had been there, but enhanced it with a variety of new plants,” Swartz explained, building a more scenic testament to the original landscape. Pathways were added around the marsh, as was a carriageway, which became known as the Fenway, and two bridges, one designed by Richardson.

Gardner’s manse and other early estates still stand along the winding road to Fairsted. The Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site opened to the public in 1981, having been purchased the previous year directly from Olmsted’s firm, which was still there. The site now includes seven acres (five were bought from the Gardner estate and are conserved to protect the viewshed) and the original residence. Also open is the two-story addition that was built in stages, mostly after Olmsted retired in 1895, to house the landscape-architecture firm he founded and others continued to foster.

A new permanent exhibit, Designing Rustic rock steps lead to a shady dell.
HARVARD SQUARED

for the Future: The Olmsteds and the American Landscape, fills most of the first floor of the house and reflects the monumental impact of Olmsted’s philosophy and work, emphasizing the collaborative nature of his legacy. “It was not just Olmsted’s vision,” Swartz says, “that made a major contribution to American landscape architecture.” Others took his ideas, as well as their own, into the future—in particular, Olmsted’s sons, John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., A.B. 1894. They worked with their father, then took over the firm when dementia forced his retirement. (He spent the last five years of his life at McLean Hospital, whose Belmont, Massachusetts, site he had helped choose years before; see Vita, “Frederick Law Olmsted,”

ALL IN A DAY: Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Sections of this seacoast city, where restaurants, shops, and architecture today charm herds of visitors, were once largely derelict. Residents resisted plans to bulldoze part of the downtown area in the 1950s, and instead helped turn 10 acres into the living history museum Strawbery Banke.

There, costumed reenactors explain the past while showing off buildings that date from about 1695 through World War II. “Mrs. Goodwin, wife of a Civil War-era governor of New Hampshire, is in her garden,” reports marketing director Stephanie Seacord, “Mrs. Stavers is at the Revolutionary War-era Pitt Tavern, and Mrs. Abbott minds her 1944-ish store, talking about rations and making do.” All are present, along with kids’ games, cooking tips, and traditional artisans—blacksmiths, barrel-makers, weavers, cooperers, and spinners—for the museum’s seventh annual New Hampshire Fall Festival on October 11.

But any off-season visit, when summer crowds are gone, reveals the core vibrancy of this community. Local art appears in Enormous Tiny Art at the Nahcotta Gallery through September 28. New films migrate from Colorado to the Telluride by the Sea festival, at The Music Hall September 19-21. Live music, from college bands to folk and jazz ensembles, is played almost nightly at clubs, such as The Blue Mermaid and The Dolphin Striker (a classic surf and turf restaurant). The Portsmouth Athenaeum hosts maritime lectures, on October 15 and November 19, and a chamber music trio on October 19. And the historic John Paul Jones House is open through October.

Portsmouth’s easy walk- and bike-ability is also a plus. Cyclists can take the Route 1B causeway to neighboring New Castle. The beach and park at Great Island Common are open year-round, as is the lesser-trod Fort Stark State Historic Site. Take a picnic and see the remnants of harbor defenses, which, like outspoken residents, proved integral to this coastal region’s survival.
July-August 2007, page 38.) Also pivotal was Charles Eliot, A.B. 1882, the son of Harvard president Charles William Eliot, whose cousin Charles Eliot Norton, Harvard professor of art history, was a good friend of Olmsted’s. The younger Eliot apprenticed with Olmsted in 1883, then returned as a leading partner of the renamed Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot, in 1893. The nation’s first landscape architecture program was established in Eliot’s honor at Harvard.

The family presence is only lightly felt at Fairsted. Olmsted married Mary, his brother’s widow, in 1859, and adopted her three children, including John, who was already 31 and a landscape architect when the family moved to Brookline. (The couple’s own son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., was about 13.) Vintage photographs of the former interiors are hung on walls, and visitors can flip through photo albums in the Olmsted-designed, pebbledash stucco-walled plant room. But the addition, where the firm was headquartered, has been restored and recreated circa 1930, when F.L. Olmsted Jr. was chiefly in charge and business at its peak, requiring about 70 employees. The sparsely decorated rooms—where bare bulbs on cords and on swinging metal arms light wooden tables and simple tools—capture the painstaking artistry of nineteenth-century design work: pen nubs and inkwells; a can of Pounce (powder used to blot ink); colored pencils and the sandpaper used to sharpen them; a velvet case for compasses and a metal canteen, both taken on field visits.

Conservators cleaned, repaired, and archived thousands of landscape plans found at the Olmsted firm.

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Pinholes on the tables mark where thousands of landscape plans were laboried over, and where lead drafting “whales” weighted the wooden arcs formed to draw Olmsted’s meandering paths. Employees serving as “copiers” sat at a “light table,” tracing fine lines of a design on paper uplit, through glass, by metal lamps on the floor. The tracings became blueprints: drawings were placed atop paper treated with cyanide salts and rolled through windows onto racks outside to develop in the sun. Later, the 1904 Wagenhorst Electric Blue Printer, also on display, brought that process indoors.

By the time the federal government took over the site, business had dwindled for years and the firm had consolidated operations on the first floor. Some 135,000 paper plans were found in a storage vault. Swartz reports, most of them “dirty, stained, brittle, and torn,” he adds, “a few with mold growing on them.” It took paper conservators nearly 15 years to inventory and repair them. Altogether, more than a million archival documents are stored on site; researchers may work there by appointment.

The restoration work outside was and is just as carefully considered. The hollow to the right of the hemlock and carriageway in front of the house, for example, is maintained as “wild,” Swartz says. Olmsted eschewed flower gardens, preferring the picturesque landscape and a palate of greens. Here, visitors descend rock steps into the hollow to find his differentiated shades, textures, shapes, and sizes cool to the eye, and more soothing to walk through.

Fairsted is ultimately a manmade environment. “He cut down all the elms out here,” Swartz explains, “except the one he intended, in the middle of the South Lawn.” That tree survived until 2011. Much discussion of historic and scholarly interpretations and practical realities (efforts to propagate cuttings from the original elm failed) led to replacing it in 2013 with a new, disease-resistant variety, the Jefferson elm. The young specimen stands alone on the lawn, cordoned off by ropes. “We’re protecting it,” says Swartz. The hope is that half a century from now, Olmsted’s visionary design will again offer the sense that nothing was placed here, that everything simply evolved.

CURIOSITIES: Staging Magic

In designing 106 costumes from scratch for the musical Finding Neverland, Suttirat Larlarb was challenged to depict Edwardian-era history with a fresh visual edge—and convey the explosive magic of the imagination. “You don’t want a museum piece set to music,” notes Larlarb, who was educated at Stanford and Yale. She has worked on numerous films (e.g., Slumdog Millionaire and Trance), and co-designed the 2012 Summer Olympics opening ceremony: recall the splendid “white-dove” cyclists? The ART’s world-premiere musical, based on the 2004 movie, has its own ceremony: recall the splendid “white-dove” cyclists? The ART’s world-premiere musical, based on the 2004 movie, has its own

Thousands of swatches were sourced to find just the right Italian lace used in this gown for actress Jeanna de Waal (Mary Barrie). too stiff to shimmy when she walks. (It was inspired by a 1901 dress at the Kyoto Costume Institute and a more recent design in Vogue Italia.) Even Mary’s satin evening gown is an “urban,” orderly, navy blue, Larlarb says, whereas her husband’s muse, Sylvia Llewelyn Davies, is a softer creature first seen playing in a park with her boys. She wears drapey, gauzy blouses and long skirts of pale oranges, pinks, and lavender—just “the right degree of bohemian hyperfemininity,” says Larlarb—and a peach-toned frock with an airy, flowery print at dinner. No matter how beautiful, the designer adds, costumes should not be signature artistic “concepts,” a word she dislikes. Instead, “they serve a larger ambition—the intended journey of the play.”

Finding Neverland
American Repertory Theater
Through September 28
http://americanrepertorytheater.org