When governments use public funds to preserve buildings and landscapes the question inevitably comes up concerning the benefits that the public can expect to draw from its investment. Fredrick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) made the difficult case that preservation benefits public health and welfare. As the most respected landscape architect in the US, Olmsted served as the first chairman of the Yosemite Reservation Commission (created in 1864), setting out a program for surveying the landscape, managing its use, and preserving its aesthetic beauty. Yosemite was the first instance in which a government set aside nature for public enjoyment, and the fledgling preservation movement faced powerful critiques aimed at revoking the legislation and allowing private interests to exploit the area for logging, ranching and farming. Olmsted argued that preservation was justified under the government’s duty to protect every citizen’s right to pursue happiness. Drawing as much from medical science as from his own romantic aesthetic education, he argued that the experience of nature could promote happiness by healing the psychological damage inflicted upon individuals by industrial urban life. More powerfully, he argued his case in terms of social equity: the working classes had the same right to pursue happiness as the elites, and to do so the government had to guarantee them access to the natural resources to do so. Olmsted made aesthetic beauty as important to the pursuit of happiness as light and air—an argument that underpinned the passing of US preservation laws a century later. Olmsted developed his thoughts on social reform and public welfare in his youth, while operating a farm in Staten Island. In the 1850s he published accounts of tours of Britain, Europe and the U.S. South, and in 1855 he joined the publishers of Putnam’s Magazine. Travels in Europe in that capacity acquainted him with the parks of major cities there, and after the failure of the publishing company in 1857, he became the superintendent of New York City’s Central Park, still yet undeveloped; the proposal for the park by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux won the public design competition. The partners—who adopted the term “landscape architecture” for their profession—subsequently designed parks, park systems and suburban communities for other U.S. cities, including Buffalo and Chicago. After the dissolution of their partnership, Olmsted worked on more park and urban plans in New York and other cities, and the grounds of the U.S. Capitol. In 1888, he designed the grounds of the Biltmore estate, home to George W. Vanderbilt—one of the world’s richest men, who bought 125,000 acres in the Blue Ridge Mountains—about a sixth of the size of Yosemite National Park—for his private enjoyment.

Keywords: Public, Aesthetics, Health, Professionalism, Landscape