Inspired by the popular kids debate podcast Smash Boom Best, Smash Boom Best Olmsted is an audio project about Frederick Law Olmsted and Boston’s Emerald Necklace. For starters, you should listen to Episode #5 Castles vs. Caves or Episode #2 Bermuda Triangle vs Loch Ness to get a sense of the show’s format and style.

The class will be divided into four groups (see below for group assignments) with each group assigned one component of the Emerald Necklace—Back Bay Fens & Riverway, Jamaica Pond & Olmsted Park, Arnold Arboretum, or Franklin Park. After collectively researching your site and writing scripts, we’ll produce an audio debate—utilizing the Recording Studios at Snell Library—in which your group will make a case for why your park is the best part of the Emerald Necklace!

Smash Boom Best Olmsted will feature four rounds of debate, just like the original show. Round 1, “Declaration of Greatness,” is a deep dive into your park. This round also includes a 30-second rebuttal of your competition’s declaration. Round 2, “Micro Round,” is a creative challenge, which might take the form of a letter to the editor, a real estate listing, or a commercial promoting your park. Round 3, “Sneak Attack,” is a total surprise and will challenge you to think on your feet. This round will be recorded live in class on Monday, October 15. Round 4, “Final Six,” is your group’s last opportunity to persuade the judges—in six words or less—of your park’s greatness. Who will win? Back Bay Fens & Riverway or Jamaica Pond & Olmsted Park?? Arnold Arboretum or Franklin Park?? Find out in class on Monday, October 22, when a panel of three judges (Dan Adams, Jane Amidon, and Genesee Brown) announce the winners of the two debates.

While the debate should be playful and engaging, the research that goes into making a persuasive argument about your park is rigorous, and involves firsthand observation, research of secondary sources, and archival research of primary sources. This research requires that your group visit the park more than once outside of class and photographically document and analyze its physical character. Each group should address questions such as: What were Olmsted’s original intentions for the park? How has the park changed over time? What are the park’s design elements? How is the park used today? How does the site function within the larger Emerald Necklace system and the city of Boston as a whole? Why is your park the most important part of the entire Necklace?

For suggestions on researching and interpreting landscapes, see the Resources page of the course website. I also recommend William Cronon’s guides, “How to Read a Landscape” and “Reading an Urban Landscape,” and also Don Mitchell’s essay, “New Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” which we’ll discuss in class on Thursday, October 4. The research you conduct for Smash Boom Best Olmsted may be useful for your final project as well.

Winning or losing won’t necessarily affect your grade for the assignment. Instead, each group will be evaluated on the following four criteria: research (40%), script and audio production (40%), collaboration (10%), and persuasiveness (10%). I’ll leave it up to individual groups to determine an efficient workflow, but I expect all group members to visit the park and participate actively in the research phase of the project. Beyond that you can delegate tasks however you see fit. For example,
half your group might focus on the “Declaration of Greatness” and the other half on the “Micro Round” and “Final Six,” or half might focus on scripting and the other half on recording and editing. Each group will be required to submit a half-page outline of your workflow and self-assessment of your collaborative process at the conclusion of the project.

TIMELINE

1. Declaration of Greatness draft script (~5 pages) > DUE Monday, October 8
2. Declaration of Greatness final script & recording (~10 minutes) > DUE Monday, October 15
3. 30-second rebuttal > DUE Thursday, October 18
4. Micro Round draft script (~2 pages) > DUE Monday, October 8
5. Micro Round final script & recording (3 minutes) > DUE Monday, October 15
6. Sneak Attack > DUE Monday, October 15 (recorded LIVE in class)
7. Final Six recording > DUE Thursday, October 18
8. Winners announced Monday, October 22

GROUP 1 / Franklin Park

- Aponte, Andrea
- Gagnon, Molly
- Hauser, Lydia
- Thompson, Shepard
- Stuparich Nouel, Paola

GROUP 2 / Arnold Arboretum

- Fong, Haley
- Greco, Isabella
- Harlow, Tessa
- Jew, Jonathan
- Parsch, Lena

GROUP 3 / Jamaica Pond & Olmsted Park

- Brousseau, Adam
- Harmelink, Madelinn
- O'Doherty, Lily
- Ramon, Adrian
- Zhang, Siming

GROUP 4 / Back Bay Fens & The Riverway

- Goharfar, Anita
- Malacaman, Gene Dominic
- Moreno, Alina
- Wei, Zifei