



*THE BEST PLANNED CITY IN THE
WORLD: Olmsted, Vaux and the
Buffalo Park System*

By Francis R. Kowsky

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Think Buffalo, N.Y., and the images that come to mind may be of a worn-out industrial city that periodically disappears from view in winter under massive snowfall. But if Buffalo's fortunes have declined since

its heyday in the late 1800s and first part of the 1900s, it still has one of the world's landmark park systems, according to Francis R. Kowsky.

Kowsky, a professor emeritus of art history in the State University of New York (SUNY) system, has detailed the history of Buffalo's public park system in "Moving Earth to Create Heaven," by the University of Massachusetts Press. As he notes, Buffalo became a testing ground for two of the 19th century's leading landscape architects, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who had designed Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City and Brooklyn, respectively.

In the Queen City of the Lakes, as Buffalo was known in the late 1800s, Olmsted and Vaux set out to create not just one extensive urban park but three, all of which would be connected to one another by large, tree-canopied boulevards, or "parkways" as Olmsted called them. With design features inspired in part by the rebuilding of Paris in the mid-1800s, the Buffalo parks, designed between 1868 and 1896, won international recognition.

As Kowsky notes, Olmsted and Vaux also led an effort to protect and beautify the area around Niagara Falls, laying the groundwork for additional park and preserved space by the falls, where the country's first state park was created in 1885.

In his book, which includes a wealth of historic photographs, postcards and maps, Kowsky points out Buffalo's park system has never "divorced from real-life concerns" and took years to reach maturity, given the political and budgetary setbacks that took place along the way.

But ultimately, it's a success story, one that became part of a larger effort in America and other countries to make cities better places to live by giving people access to green space — what Olmsted called "democracy in trees and dirt."