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Buffalo scholar's book shines light on city secret



Francis Kowsky, professor emeritus at SUNY Buffalo State, who wrote “The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System,” pauses on Chapin Parkway, part of the Olmsted parks system. Derek Gee/Buffalo News

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Buffalo’s system of verdant parks and manicured parkways, circles and squares designed by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux was the first of its kind in the country, but in many quarters that remains a well-kept secret.

That’s a historical slight that a new book by Buffalo scholar Francis R. Kowsky, an architectural historian and distinguished professor emeritus of art history at SUNY Buffalo State, hopes to correct in the artfully rendered and comprehensive “The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System.”

The book is the opening volume in the “Designing the American Park” series from the Library of American Landscape History, in conjunction with University of Massachusetts Press.

The preface, by series editor Ethan Carr, notes that the Buffalo park system, begun a few years after Olmsted and Vaux designed Prospect Park in Brooklyn and while their design of New York's Central Park was still under construction, "has not only been less studied, but it has been less than fully appreciated in terms of its historical significance."

That's something Kowsky wants to rectify. "Everyone talks about the 'Emerald Necklace,' that group of parks in Boston that Olmsted did later, and there's usually a footnote or mention that, well, in Buffalo he laid out this type of thinking, but it's just been overlooked in the literature," Kowsky said.

"Buffalo was the first place that Olmsted and Vaux formed a network throughout a city to not only connect parks, which they did, but to also be a generator of new residential neighborhoods, and the influence of that cannot be underestimated. I'm hoping to shine a light on their work, and the progressively designed city that Buffalo was and remains."

The book's title comes from Olmsted himself, who said at the first official world's fair, held in 1876 in Philadelphia, that Buffalo was "the best planned city, as to its streets, public places and grounds, in the United States, if not in the world."

Kowsky, who also wrote "Country, Park & City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux," has long been committed to the Olmsted parks system. He also has teamed over the years with architectural historian Martin Wachadlo to write more than 15 nominations to the National Register of Historic Places and other historic designations.

In "The Best Planned City in the World," Kowsky draws upon numerous primary sources, including original plans, drawings, photographs and written material, along with commissioned color photos by Andy Olenick. He tells the story of how Olmsted and his partnership with Vaux brought their groundbreaking plans to the Queen City and revolutionized urban design nearly a century and a half ago.

The two men, in the forefront of the national parks movement, were brought to Buffalo in 1868 by a group of public-spirited citizens, including attorney William Dorsheimer, an early client of renowned architect H.H. Richardson, who saw the need for municipal parks to function as public spaces that could offer respite and recreation, while at the same time democratize public space by making it available to all regardless of social class.

Their vision initially included three carefully planned, distinct parks linked by extravagant, tree-canopied parkways. Delaware Park was intended as a place for passive recreation, such as walks, picnics or gazing out on the pastoral landscape. Front Park was designed with more active sports in mind and enjoyment of the scenery of Lake Erie and the Niagara River, while the Parade – later Humboldt Park and today, Martin Luther King Park – was meant to be more a place to socialize and for activities.

The work of Olmsted and Vaux, who would also design the grounds of Richardson's Buffalo State Hospital, augmented Joseph Ellicott's acclaimed radial grid plan for the city.

Later, Olmsted and Vaux – their initial partnership had lasted from 1868 to 1872 – teamed up in the mid-1880s to design the Niagara Reservation (now Niagara Falls State Park) and other areas around Niagara Falls.

The Olmsted parks system suffered mightily over the years, from the destruction of Humboldt Parkway to make way for the Kensington Expressway, to the construction of the Scajaquada Expressway that separated Delaware Park from Forest Lawn. The upkeep of the parks system also fell into disrepair during the post-war period. The introduction of golf at Delaware, Cazenovia and South parks also has drawn criticism.

“There was a sense of mystery. A lot of that is gone now,” Kowsky said.

But he praises the Friends of Olmsted Parks, formed in 1978, for spearheading the parks system resurrection widely acknowledged today under the stewardship of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, where Kowsky serves on the design review committee.

“The book is a pretty exciting addition to the Olmsted scholarship in Buffalo and is lavishly illustrated with images that even I’ve never seen before,” said Thomas Herrera-Mishler, the conservancy’s president. “It’s also not just a scholarly treatise, it’s a great read.”

Kowsky concludes with Buffalo-born author Lauren Belfer’s observation that “if Olmsted had been a painter, Buffalo would have been his canvas,” suggesting that the nation’s foremost landscape architect “was indeed an artist” whose work was on display in his lush landscape compositions.

“In the realm of public parks, I would maintain, Buffalo (including Niagara) was the client for which Olmsted exercised the fullest measure of his genius,” Kowsky said.

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