

“The Best Planned City in the World; Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System”
by Francis R. Kowsky, University of Massachusetts Press, 2013

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Before Chicago there was Buffalo.

Before sunrises bounced off the shimmering waters of Lake Michigan onto the grand economic powerhouse of the Windy City, sunsets bounced off the shimmering waters of Lake Erie over the grand economic powerhouse of the Queen City. Before Frederick Law Olmsted worked his design magic on the World Columbian Exhibition and Jackson Park, he and Calvert Vaux had worked their magic on Delaware Park, Scajaquada Parkway and the Front.

In the middle of the 19th century, playing off its key location between the Great Lakes and the one flatwater route to the Atlantic Ocean at New York City, Buffalo flourished. The success began in 1825 with the Erie Canal and then mushroomed through the proliferation of railroads paralleling and in fact overshadowing the pathbreaking waterway. Through another geographical quirk, while Buffalo was spared the carnage of the Civil War, it profited hugely from the shipment and manufacture of all kinds of needed war materiel. By 1890 the city would become the world's largest coal and lumber distribution center while it also manufactured fertilizer, soap, railroad cars, milling machinery, refrigerators, carriages, farm implements, iron stoves, bridges, scales, boots, shoes and furniture. At the time the nation's eighth-largest city, it gave the U.S. two Presidents, and was reputed to have a higher percentage of millionaires than any other place in the U.S.

Buffalo seemed to have a future without limit as its residents looked westward. To the east, of course, it was doomed always to play second fiddle to its cross-state rival, New York. But Buffalo's leaders, particularly in the business community, made the best of the situation by carefully studying some of the breakthroughs coming out of the larger, older city. Thus, in 1868, an invitation was made to Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the men who had designed Central Park, to come upstate and pass their judgments on the opportunity for Buffalo to demonstrate its civic arrival with a grand new park.

This is the story that Francis Kowsky tells, and he does so virtually to perfection.

When Olmsted closely examined the city for the first time, he was accompanied by his prominent host, attorney William Dorsheimer. (Vaux was away in Europe.) Dorsheimer had many good ideas and observations, but Olmsted on his own came to a set of breathtakingly creative conclusions. Rejecting the expected approach of one big central park (as in New York and Brooklyn) he recommended that Buffalo construct three distinctly purposed parks connected by a web of handsome parkways.

Parkways were a new genre. Olmsted and Vaux had been toying with their unprecedented concept in Brooklyn, but physical and political challenges stymied most of their brainstormings (including the idea of linking Central and Prospect Parks). Buffalo, with three separate parks, is

where the idea was most needed and where it came together. And this seed was planted on most fertile ground, for the existing street grid of the original village had been thoughtfully laid out back in 1804 by Joseph Ellicott, a former assistant to the man who planned Washington, D.C., Peter L'Enfant. Through Ellicott's good eye for geography and terrain, Buffalo began life with the bones of an excellent plan upon which to grow, and the Olmsted/Vaux parkways extended it beautifully. This led to Olmsted's half-laudatory, half-self-serving 1876 quote that became the title of Kowsky's book.

From the vantage point of today's politics, it is almost inconceivable that the Buffalo park system came into being so quickly. From the first visit in August, 1868, through a formal presentation in October, to the presentation of a finished report with working plans in August, 1869, through a Common Council vote in November, through preliminary work in the spring of 1870 and the beginning of construction in the fall, it was barely two years from conception to groundbreaking, and by the summer of 1874 the parks and parkways had been completed in their basic form. Not that there wasn't controversy – just as today, there were battles between ethnic factions, between new immigrants and long-time residents, between north-siders and south-siders, and between fiscal liberals and conservatives – but the battles were fought sharply and resolved quickly.

In today's world every facet of life has speeded up except for the creation of great public works for civic beautification and improvement. Kowsky doesn't delve into this anomaly but perhaps he can explore it in his next book.

Even while Buffalo became gradually eclipsed by Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland, it retained a strong economic profile through World War II and into the 1950s. Then the St. Lawrence Seaway, among other challenges, undermined its status – born through one canal, mortally wounded by another. But through good times and bad, the Olmsted system has provided Buffalonians with remarkable beauty, environmental conservation, sports and economic payback. Even today, despite the city's shockingly deteriorated housing prices, the homes along Delaware Avenue, Bidwell Parkway, Lincoln Parkway and other great boulevards retain their extraordinary beauty and their economic desirability.

Kowsky, a distinguished professor emeritus of art history at SUNY Buffalo, tells a story that is politically captivating and geographically understandable even for a non-Buffalonian reader. When he makes specific references to streets and other particular locations, he backs them up with maps, drawings, photographs (old and new) and even postcard views. The points he makes and the histories he tells verbally are beautifully buttressed with clear and substantive captions.

Like all historians writing about the voluble Olmsted, Kowsky has an endless number of quotes, speculations and observations to sift through and work with, which he does admirably. Not only about the day-to-day issues of horticulture, views, materials, nomenclature, and politics, but also about the larger, long-term concepts such as Buffalo's pained relationship to its Erie lakefront. The Buffalo assignment took place at the time when Olmsted and Vaux were broadening their thinking from traditional park design to the larger issues of city form and urban planning.

After the most devastating setback regarding his idea for a great lakeshore park, a saddened and angry Olmsted was still able to turn philosophical as he told the park commissioners,

“Judging from the general drift of public opinion with reference to such matters, as I have had occasion to follow in other cities, the project of a lake shore park will be from time to time revived until, from regard to the interest of the city as a whole, it is adopted.”

That adoption, unfortunately, is still very much stuck in conversation even today. Unlike Chicago, whose very city charter proclaimed a lakefront “forever open free and clear,” Buffalo still hasn’t come to consensus on its relationship with its lakefront. Should it be used for a park, housing, industry, or the remaining iconic, historical grain elevators? Is it the city’s defining geographic, ecological and visual element, or is it a freezing, windswept and snowy location not fit for man or beast six months out of the year? Or – today’s defacto reality – should it be dominated by a highway that precludes much else in the way of redevelopment?

Sadly, half a century after Olmsted’s death, his quote – the book’s title – was upended by the highway builders. The great planning was undermined, both downtown (with the Buffalo Skyway, an out-of-place “eyesoar” that sucks traffic and vitality out of the city) and also in Olmsted’s own Delaware Park (with the conversion of lovely Scajaquada Parkway into a high-speed expressway). Will Buffalo ever rebound from its economic doldrums? This is the haunting question that almost mocks the book’s title. And if it does, will it be due partly to the Olmsted-Vaux park system? In the landscape architecture world there is much rhetorical allegiance to slogans like, “You can’t have a great city without a great park system,” but what about the converse? Can you have great parks and a mediocre city?

For people with a job or a pension, Buffalo provides a terrific quality of life – high levels of amenity and low cost of living. For poor people it’s a different story, with few jobs and few opportunities. In theory, Buffalo should turn the corner – there is plenty of cheap housing available, the park system is a draw, there is plenty of water plus a surfeit of electricity from Niagara Falls, and – who knows? – climate change might even bring warmer winters without any accompanying threat of rising sea levels. From the park perspective there are glimmers of hope. Most significant is the creation and the continued growth of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, the privately funded park support organization that has not only brought the system back to a high level of beauty and functionality but is also a major player in the four-decade effort to reestablish the reputation and appreciation of Frederick Law Olmsted himself. (By the 1970s, at the time the conservancy was established, Olmsted the man had almost disappeared from Americans’ awareness; his long road to rediscovery began with the first meeting of the National Association of Olmsted Parks, held in Buffalo in 1978.)

Also highly significant is the fledgling attempt to deconstruct NY 198/33, the high-speed highways that obliterated Olmsted’s Scajaquada and Humboldt Parkways and violated Delaware Park. Kowsky alludes sorrowfully to the tragedy of the freeway construction during the Nelson Rockefeller years, but this book is not designed to be an advocacy polemic. That will be up to others who are inspired by Kowsky’s historical and artistic knowledge as a base for the agitation for a revived and greater Buffalo.

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