

The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System

By Francis R. Kowsky

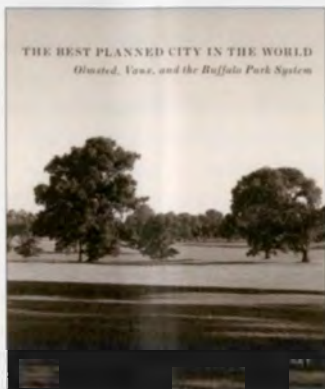
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On the occasion of the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, Frederick Law Olmsted described a certain American city as “the best

planned city, as to its streets, public places and grounds, in the United States, if not the world.” Surprisingly he was writing about Buffalo, New York, today a city more renowned for urban blight, chicken wings, and snow than for landscaped thoroughfares and expansive parks.

Nonetheless, when Buffalo’s business leaders invited Olmsted to the city in 1868 to advise on possible parks, Buffalo was among the wealthiest and most important cities in America, its harbor one of the busi-

est in the world. With its pivotal location – at the easternmost point of Lake Erie and terminus of the Erie Canal – and its growing railroad facilities, Buffalo was the conduit for goods from America’s interior to the eastern seaboard and abroad. Grain, lumber, cattle, and coal flowed through



the city, and industry and commerce flourished. Farsighted businessmen, flush with prosperity and civic pride, decided that Buffalo needed parks worthy of its

national prominence.

Olmsted and his firm worked in Buffalo for over thirty years, and his plan for the city entailed much more than scattered urban parks; instead, he envisioned a cohesive, citywide system of parks, boulevards, and public spaces. He wanted to create, as Buffalo’s present-day Olmsted fans are fond of quoting, “a city within a park.”

The realization of this concept was not his alone. Calvert Vaux collaborated on the early projects, until the Olmsted/Vaux partnership dissolved in 1872; and in the 1880s the two joined forces again to create

the Reservation at nearby Niagara Falls, which was the country’s first state park. During their decades of work in Buffalo, Olmsted, Vaux, and the Olmsted firm designed and built (I am using their modern names): Delaware, Front, Martin Luther King Jr., South, Cazenovia, and Riverside Parks; Bidwell, Lincoln, Chapin, and Humboldt Parkways; Gates Circle, Soldier’s Place, Colonial Circle, and Symphony Circle; the extensive landscape of the Buffalo Psychiatric Center and the grounds of the Old County Hall; the Parkside neighborhood, Richmond Avenue, Niagara Square, Prospect Place, and more.

Calvert Vaux’s collaboration was pivotal for Delaware Park, Martin Luther King, Jr. Park, and the Buffalo Psychiatric Center. He filled the two parks with whimsical structures that included covered benches, a spired gazebo, and a wooden boathouse. His vast Parade House, located in what is now Martin Luther King Jr. Park, provided a gathering place for such festivities as dancing, dining, music, and theater. Alas, the Parade House, one of Vaux’s greatest creations, was destroyed by fire in 1877.

When I grew up in Buffalo during the 1960s and early 1970s, the names of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux were rarely heard. In those days, few in Buffalo seemed to value or even remember the city’s past glories. The scenic lake in Delaware Park had become an oozing dumping ground. Front Park, with its breathtaking view of Lake Erie, was lost amid a confusion of highways and entry ramps. Much of Vaux’s work had been lost, not only to fire but also to civic disregard.

But enough remained of the Olmsted and Vaux legacy that when I remember the Buffalo of my childhood, I see myself walking within the landscape they created: the alluring residential boulevards lined with rows of mature elm trees, their branches meeting in a sun-dappled roof above my head; the rustic paths through Delaware Park, where I rode my bike or walked with friends; the tranquil Parkside neighborhood with its curving streets, where I went each week for my piano lesson; the meadow vistas stretching into the distance. All this gave me a sense not simply of natural beauty, but also of exhilaration and renewal. Even though I didn’t know their names, I lived within Olmsted’s and Vaux’s imaginations every day of my Buffalo youth.

Their vision shaped the world I grew up in, and so shaped my life.

Francis R. Kowsky, the author of *The Best Planned City in the World*, has also known daily life within the imaginations of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, and he credits his firsthand experiences as an inspiration for this book. Kowsky spent his teaching career at Buffalo State College – where he is now SUNY Distinguished Professor of Fine Arts (Emeritus) – one block from Olmsted and Vaux’s Delaware Park and next door to the Buffalo Psychiatric Center, with its Olmsted and Vaux-designed landscape. “This book,” he writes, “commemorates my personal journey through the early history of the Olmsted cityscape.” Kowsky is steeped in the Olmsted and Vaux legacies, and his earlier writings include the landmark study, *Country, Park & City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

In his magnificent new book, with its lucid prose and deft organization, Kowsky follows the evolution of Olmsted and Vaux’s astonishing creations in Buffalo – those “landscapes of recreation, residence, memory, and healing,” as he so gracefully describes

them – from their initial design and their growth into maturity through their heartbreaking decline and, in recent times, tentative rebirth. An extraordinary variety and abundance of illustrations fill the book, including photographs new and old, maps, diagrams, paintings, and lithographs. As a physical object, *The Best Planned City in the World* has a beauty worthy of its subject.

Kowsky begins by examining the origins and development of the American park movement, reviewing its British and French antecedents. He explains the philosophy that led to Olmsted and Vaux’s proposal for Central Park and shows how the two men transformed their ideals into reality. Having thus set the stage, Kowsky turns to Buffalo.

Before Olmsted’s arrival, Buffalo had one notable designed landscape: Forest Lawn Cemetery, dedicated in 1866 and still one of the jewels of the city. Olmsted decided to build his park, now called Delaware Park, on land adjacent to the cemetery.

Kowsky examines first this project and then each of the Olmsted/Vaux and Olmsted firm’s designs for Buffalo. The author’s ability to look at projects from a seedlings-in-the-ground to a citywide perspective is one of the great achievements

of this book. Quotations from Olmsted’s letters and other documents reveal his and his colleagues’ thought processes over years of work. Local newspaper commentaries show how the citizens of Buffalo reacted to their new landscapes – enthusiastically and otherwise. Kowsky is especially eloquent in his description of Calvert Vaux’s Parade House, which he calls a “double-storied towered chalet [that] summoned visitors to revelries simply by its wondrous appearance.” The illustrations of the lost Parade House more than justify this claim, and the author’s detailed descriptions of its planning are fascinating.

Kowsky interrupts his narrative on Buffalo to provide a fascinating examination of the forces brought to bear in Olmsted’s campaign to preserve Niagara Falls, roughly seventeen miles from the city. When Olmsted began his work in Buffalo, the area around the American Falls was literally a carnival, rife with hucksterism and criminality. The islands in the rapids had become a manufacturing center. A paper mill, tannery, foundry, even a laundry, exploited the water power of the Niagara rapids.

Olmsted conceived the idea to turn the area into a “reservation” owned by the State of New York. The details of his campaign, with its complex political maneuvering, private dinners among power brokers, and attempts to influence public opinion, read like a suspense story. In 1886, the Niagara Reservation became a reality. No longer, writes Kowsky, was the area immediately around the falls “in danger of being overrun by the unchecked forces of commerce, manufacturing, and hucksterism.” At this point, Olmsted and Vaux’s labors truly began at Niagara, as they reclaimed and redesigned the landscape to bring it back to a more natural state.

Kowsky believes that the years have not been kind to Olmsted and Vaux’s work at Niagara. He particularly laments the current conditions on Goat Island, with its extensive surface parking, large restaurant, souvenir shop, and fast-food concessions. And yet . . . on the adjoining Three Sisters Islands, visitors can still walk through peaceful glades amid lush vegetation, bathed by sparkling, misty light, and experience Olmsted and Vaux’s original vision for this remarkable place.

By the late nineteenth century, politics and patronage were beginning to

diminish the purity of Olmsted’s vision in Buffalo. William McMillan, superintendent of the Buffalo parks for over twenty-five years and a stalwart defender of Olmsted’s principles, was fired in 1897, apparently because he opposed discordant construction within the park. Soon two monumental museums, both Neoclassical in design, were built on promontories overlooking Delaware Park’s lake. Calvert Vaux’s fanciful wooden boathouse was replaced by what Kowsky calls “a bulky masonry building reminiscent of Pompeian villas.” In 1905 a life-size reproduction of Michelangelo’s statue of David was donated by a wealthy park patron and placed in a prominent position on a bluff overlooking the water, where it remains a startling sight. As time passed, the park’s meadow became a golf course and its Deer Paddock a zoo with surface parking. Tennis courts and baseball diamonds joined the mix. Later generations might say that the museums and their classical-revival grandeur at least contributed to the cultural life of the city and perhaps added to the beauty of Delaware Park, even though they went against Olmsted’s sylvan ideal. But these depredations were

nothing, compared with what was to come.

In the late 1950s an expressway replaced Delaware Park’s North Meadow carriage drive. Access to the park lake from the north became a pedestrian overpass. And then in the 1960s, as Kowsky says of Humboldt Parkway, “city leaders decided . . . that the distinguished boulevard and its surrounding neighborhood” – home to a strong middle-class African-American community – “were expendable. As in many other places, a sense of history and an appreciation for urban life were absent from the city’s political circles. Transportation, one of the major forces that built the city, would now begin to destroy it.” For Buffalo residents, photographs of healthy, mature trees being cut down by the dozen on Humboldt Parkway are searing to this day. The replacement of the astonishing urban landscape that was Olmsted’s grand creation – almost two miles long, two hundred feet wide, six rows of trees across – with a hideous and, some in Buffalo would say now, unnecessary expressway was one of the tragedies of the city’s twentieth-century history and a loss to the nation itself.

Nature, too, took its toll on Buffalo. Olmsted favored the use of the elm tree on

the city's boulevards and streets, and thousands of elms were planted in Buffalo at his direction. As a result of Dutch elm disease, at its worst in the 1960s, entire neighborhoods lost their glorious trees. Before long the whole city was stripped bare. Ironically Olmsted and Vaux had opted to plant Humboldt Parkway with linden and tulip trees, which presumably would have survived the devastation of Dutch elm disease, if they hadn't been destroyed to make way for a multilane highway.

Finally, when Buffalo's heritage seemed all but lost, new visionaries stepped forward to take responsibility for their city's future. Money was raised to replant the parkways. Local groups organized to fight to place Olmsted's park and parkway system, as well as the Parkside neighborhood, onto the National Register of Historic Places. Preservationists successfully fought for National Historic Landmark status for the Buffalo Psychiatric Center. The Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, modeled on the Central Park Conservancy, became the manager of the Olmsted parks and parkways on behalf of the city. The conservancy's overall plan includes the goal of dismantling the expressway and rebuilding Humboldt

Parkway as it used to be. This option would have been inconceivable not so long ago.

On a recent trip to Buffalo, I decided to walk to Delaware Park from my mother's home. I went down Chapin Parkway, two hundred feet wide, with its six rows of replanted trees leading me along the boulevard as if through a stately forest. The trees didn't yet meet in a cathedral-like arch above my head, but they were tall and shapely. I rounded the traffic circle at Soldier's Place and turned onto Lincoln Parkway, with its own six rows of trees to lead me onward. The park beckoned in the distance. The sun was out after a rainstorm, and the damp leaves shimmered and shone as the dazzling light filtered among them. With a sense of exaltation, I walked through Frederick Law Olmsted's vision of what a city could, and should, be.

"Buffalo (including Niagara)," writes Kowsky, "was the client for which Olmsted exercised the fullest measure of his genius." In this essential and remarkable book, the author shows us what the fullest measure of Frederick Law Olmsted's genius looked like.

— Lauren Belfer