This good book’s attention-grabbing title is cleverly borrowed from a statement made by an ever-entrepreneurial Frederick Law Olmsted, as he showed off his own work for Buffalo at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Buffalo may not actually be the best-planned city in the world. However, if one happened to visit Buffalo near the end of the 19th century, it would have been quite plausible to conclude that the city was among the best planned, not to mention among the most industrious, prosperous, and rapidly growing urban centers in America, if not the world.

Francis Kowsky has painted an excellent portrait of Buffalo in its heyday, as its leaders embarked on the city’s most important public placemaking transformations. The book offers two gifts for the citizens of Buffalo and anyone interested in the evolution of American cities, particularly during their “furnace stage” of growth in the second half of the 19th century. First, Kowsky brings attention to Olmsted’s and Calvert Vaux’s earliest, initially famous and then not-so-well-known plan to establish a metropolitan park system, rather than just a singular park. Even with such monumental achievements as Central Park and Prospect Park in New York, Olmsted lamented his failure to persuade city leaders to complete a park system for the city of New York. A decade or so before he undertook his more famous urban park network, Boston’s Emerald Necklace, Olmsted seized on the opportunity that had eluded him in New York. He convinced Buffalo’s park advocates of the value of constructing not one but three (and later other) substantial parks, along with a set of parkways to connect them. In Buffalo, relying on a favorite biological analogy, Olmsted would demonstrate that the modern city required both “lungs” and “arteries” to mitigate the consequences of industrialization-burdened growth. The lungs would have to be located well and sized and designed properly. The basis for the arteries, broad diagonal streets emanating from a center, partially existed in Joseph Ellicott’s original plan for the town in 1804. Olmsted seized on this local condition, whose American precedent was Ellicott and his brother Andrew’s work on surveying L’Enfant’s plan for the nation’s capital a decade earlier.

The book’s second important contribution is to remind us how important the city of Buffalo was to the history of industrial-era America. This is also generally overlooked, since Buffalo’s most recent half-century narrative has been more about decline (or monumental snowfall) than growth and prosperity. Kowsky quotes a newspaper account that captures Buffalo’s moment: “The city, its geographical position and facilities for railway and water communication, are acknowledged to be superior to all other points.” So praised the New York Times in an 1869 article during Buffalo’s International Industrial Exhibition, a world’s-fair-like event—quite a compliment from the leading newspaper of the city well on its way to assuming the mantle of America’s greatest metropolis. Commanding the intersection of the Great Lakes and the Erie Canal, and an expansive web of rail lines, Buffalo’s setting and its industriousness were, in fact, helping New York City to become the “capital of capitalism.” And Buffalo’s own might seemed destined to grow. Thus, its leading citizens began to demand the kinds of grand civic improvements—such as a great park system—being realized in other major cities.
The book opens with a good concise overview of the origins of the American park movement. Kowsky explores its antecedents in the English landscape garden movement: in the desire to emulate the urban gardens of European capitals as these were being converted from royal to public use, in the growing demand to preserve open space for pleasure and recreational purposes in rapidly growing American cities, and in the campaign by advocates such as Andrew Jackson Downing for a central park in New York. That campaign’s success would, of course, give birth to Olmsted’s remarkable second career as a landscape architect and urban planner.

The construction and success of Central Park fueled a desire to create something comparable in Buffalo, ultimately leading to an invitation in 1868 for Olmsted to visit. Local park advocates who were having modest success advancing their ideas hoped to persuade the now-prominent firm Olmsted and Vaux to carry forth their cause. A few years later a similar expectation and set of circumstances—and perhaps news of Buffalo’s progress—would lead the newly formed Boston Park Commissioners to invite Olmsted to Boston to do the same.

There he would eventually establish his home and office, and arguably complete an even more extensive park network.

Though the work of Boston’s Emerald Necklace followed Buffalo’s, Boston played one important precursor role in Buffalo’s saga. The popularity earlier in the 19th century of the rural cemetery movement, begun with the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and expanding to places such as the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn and Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, led to the design of Buffalo’s Forest Lawn Cemetery, the city’s first large designed landscape. Olmsted’s admiration for the Forest Lawn Cemetery and for its designer, Adolph Strauch, increased his interest in working in Buffalo. The impressive landscape of the cemetery even led Olmsted to locate what would become Buffalo’s central park, today’s Delaware Park, just north and immediately adjacent to the cemetery.

Among the virtues of Kowsky’s scholarship are the references to lesser-known figures such as Strauch and to their contributions. Olmsted’s colossal stature in the birth of the landscape architecture profession often overshadows other important contemporaneous planners, designers, collaborators, rivals, and champions. A number of these appear in Kowsky’s story.
MORE THAN AN ANTIDOTE TO THE ILLS OF THE RAPIDLY INDUSTRIALIZING CITY, NATURE WAS USED AS A CIVILIZING FORCE.

They enhance our understanding of how many people were required to play key roles in what, after all, were immensely complicated engineering, fiscal, logistical, and political undertakings of municipal park building. For example, Kowsky points out that William McMillan, the superintendent of Buffalo's park-building effort for 26 years, was nearly as important to the success of the Buffalo effort as Olmsted. Olmsted himself, along with his sons, agreed, Kowsky reports, as in a correspondence Olmsted expresses that McMillan deserves the moniker of “Father of the Buffalo park system.” Other figures that Kowsky resurrects from various levels of obscurity, from future presidents (Grover Cleveland, a lawyer in Buffalo when Olmsted arrived and later governor of New York) to tireless advocates to staunch detractors, help fill out the history. They hold the reader’s attention to the drama and complexities of the undertaking, not just to the results enabled by a singular hero.

While many Buffalonians are shown to contribute and maintain long-term commitment to the efforts in Buffalo and later to the Niagara Reservation, the heroic Olmsted does make frequent appearances. Kowsky borrows the “double-edged genius” label from Olmsted’s biographer, Laura Roper, reminding the reader that Olmsted’s power was as both an artist and a social reformer. As in other publications about Olmsted, his own words are quoted often. Kowsky goes to considerable effort to point out Olmsted’s multiple agendas for his urban parks and quotes him about the purpose of urban park building: “A work of art.... To provide contrast, change, recreation, and relief from the turmoil of the city...[its] great breadth and openness of land are required to get rid of the sense of concretion produced by brick walls and paved streets.” This is not Olmsted’s most elegant definition of a park, but it serves Kowsky’s purpose in establishing Olmsted’s design interests and philosophical stance. These parks were to be an art of the landscape, yes, but even more were they to be instruments for social betterment.

The main body of the book concentrates on the individual parks and parkways that constitute the Buffalo system, describing each place and effort in great detail. In support of the text the book includes, as is usual, historic maps and photographs, but also splendid contemporary photographs by Andy Olenick that were commissioned for this publication. These reveal the remaining splendor of Buffalo’s open spaces. Kowsky’s careful accounts describe the interplay between civic aspirations, design ambition, land assembly machinations, perils of construction, arguments about species selection, management headaches, and moments of inspiration and despair. The accounts illuminate the wonder of what was being achieved. The park building unfolds against the city’s burgeoning civic optimism, so rare today among our industrial-era cities. Momentum was sustained on the belief in the necessity of the effort. As was true in a number of American cities at the time, both those who turned to Olmsted and those who found talented contemporaries, the park-building efforts were not perceived primarily as beautification but as critical to the well-being of city dwellers as industrialization hurtled forward with no apparent end.

Change on the streets of the late 19th-century American city was constant and nerve-racking. Whole blocks, entire neighborhoods, and acres of urban spread were unfolding, the number of inhabitants growing apace. The presence of nature, on the other hand, and nature’s “healing” qualities were receding from everyday urban life. So one purpose of all this park building was to retain some of this receding nature within the confines of the city. But a more profound purpose, and Kowsky hints at this, was to mitigate the very ephemerality of the urban world being built—as it surely would be rebuilt again and again—with the constancy of nature’s presence. The urban park was to be in this sense America’s answer to the medieval European town square, a place of stasis, even repose, as everything around it bustled and changed. The echoes of this idea trace back to midcentury Transcendentalists who juxtaposed the indomitable nature against the ephemerality of the human presence on Earth. The public park was to be more than an antidote to the ills of the rapidly industrializing city. The public park was to deploy nature as a “civilizing force” for the growing city.

Many would add “urban visionary” to Olmsted’s artistic and social appellations, thus, one supposes, making of him a “triple genius.” Not all, however, agree, since Olmsted bears some responsibility for the popularization of a suburbanized urban landscape. Kowsky touches on this as well, though without casting judgment. He dedicates some pages to Olmsted’s involvement in the design of Parkside, a large residential area immediately to the north of Delaware Park, modeled on Riverside, Illinois. Olmsted’s Riverside is often referred to as America’s first planned community, though today’s ardent antispawr activists consider this a euphemistic description for what they would describe as an early precedent for mid-20th-century
suburban subdivisions. Kowsky, the historian, casts the issue in terms of the sensibilities of the late 19th century, when it seemed so favorable for urban dwellers to imagine living a bit away from the noxious and stressful places of labor and industry. In introducing the work on Parkside, he includes a lengthy Olmsted passage that some would see indicting Olmsted as a "suburbanite." A part of this passage reads:

People are hereafter going to do business in one quarter of a town and live in another... Let the citizen build up his stores and his warehouses as high and as close together as he pleases, but he doesn't want to live among them and there is no longer any need of his doing so. He can live in much better style and cheaper in a part of the city entirely given up to dwellings.

In Kowsky's view, with which I concur, Olmsted was not expressing an anticity view. He was not rejecting the shift from the agrarian America to the rapidly urbanizing one. He was responding to specific stresses of his era's urbanization and offering a means of adjustment that would retain pastoral qualities where people would dwell and help mitigate the more brutal aspects of industrialization. Kowsky notes that Parkside, unlike Riverside built miles from central Chicago, was part of Buffalo itself and, as its name suggests, lay contiguous to the city's major park. It is only from our vantage point following the vast suburbanization of the 20th century that we judge Olmsted's proclivity for lower residential densities as not encouraging lively cities. On the other hand, and putting aside Olmsted's several residential experiments, can we imagine the livability of our cities without his parks?

As the open spaces that Olmsted and Vaux initially proposed took form, various other commissions for smaller parks, plazas, grounds surrounding public buildings, and streetscapes came to Olmsted and later to his sons. The book covers these in the later chapters, revealing just how extensive Olmsted and his firm's impact on the city of Buffalo was across generations. This impact is truly extraordinary, even without considering Olmsted's role in helping organize the conservation of lands around and including Niagara Falls and the eventual creation of the Niagara Reservation. Kowsky describes the Niagara campaign near the end of the book. That subject may well be worth an entire book.

Back in the city of Buffalo, the effort perhaps second in historic importance to the main parks themselves was the collaboration with H. H. Richardson, a friend and eventual neighbor in Brookline, Massachusetts, on the design of the Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane, realized between 1870 and 1890 on 200 acres of farmland immediately to the west of Delaware Park. The remaining structures and landscape of this National Historic Landmark were recently renamed the Richardson Olmsted Complex. The 200 acres were identified by Olmsted for the extension of the park system and were pursued in that way as he laid out the grounds around the monumental asylum buildings, retaining extensive agricultural fields (no longer there) for the use of patients as part of their therapeutic treatment. An 1881 Olmsted plan reproduced in the book clearly shows the intent to see the asylum grounds as the continuation of the Delaware Park landscape.

The collaboration on the asylum was actually among three prominent Americans: Olmsted, Richardson, and Thomas Kirkbride, a doctor whose theories on how to treat and house the mentally ill revolutionized the design of mental health facilities during the second half of the 19th century. Many were built under the nomenclature of the Kirkbride Plan, with the Buffalo facility being among the largest and most impressive. Both the buildings and grounds, having been much abused, partially demolished, and eventually abandoned for several decades, are now being restored. The goal is to find a variety of public and cultural uses for the surviving Richardson structures and, to the degree possible, return the landscape to its original design, now as a public rather than an institutional landscape. Success in doing so may enable, more than a century later, the connectivity initially envisioned to the adjacent Delaware Park.

Here is where Kowsky's book, in addition to its noteworthy scholarship, is particularly important. It may be useful to the city both as recovered history and in support of its present economic development initiatives. Having been involved in the recent master planning of the Richardson Olmsted Complex, I believe that the book can help build additional support for its restoration by situating the complex squarely within the great park-building program. And as Buffalo embarks with determination to reverse the decades of urban decline, relying in no small measure on its history as a vehicle for attracting investment and visitors, Kowsky's account of Buffalo's public placemaking heritage can surely play an important role. This is the best kind of history: informative, revealing, and directly useful to the current needs of the city its author so vividly portrays at its moment of genuine civic pride and optimism.

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