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

By Francis R. Kowsky

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Over the past three decades, Buffalo has reawakened to Frederick Law Olmsted’s vision of an integrated system of parks and spacious parkways. The Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy has been hard at work restoring much of the natural landscape that was destroyed, and along Forest Avenue grading and replanting are underway on the grounds of the Richardson Complex. The publication of this book, therefore, is well timed to coexist with the renaissance the city is experiencing.

As the inaugural volume of “Designing the American Park,” a series planned by the Library of American Landscape History, The Best Planned City in the World contributes to the national body of landscape architecture history. It also serves as the definitive history of Buffalo’s impressive system of parks and parkways. It is one of the most important books on Buffalo’s heritage published in recent years.

Francis R. Kowsky, SUNY Distinguished Professor of Fine Arts emeritus at Buffalo State, has spent an academic lifetime researching American art and architecture, with a special interest in the life and work of Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. But this work is more than a scholarly approach to the planning of Buffalo’s parks. Social and political background is woven into his narrative of landscape design, and the color images create a book that looks as good on a coffee table as in a research library. Andy Olenick’s photographs of the parks and parkways as they look today are another bonus.

Kowsky’s research into the evolution of our park system motivates Western New Yorkers to get out and explore these parks. Gazing at Olenick’s photograph that looks down on Gates Circle and the span of greenery that is Chapin Parkway (which must have been shot from a room in the former Millard Fillmore Hospital), one thinks about what lies in store for the now vacant building. We can only hope that whoever redevelops the site can see the beauty in that tree-lined parkway.

So many fascinating details fill these pages: How Niagara Square almost became the site of the arch created by Stanford White that ended up instead in Washington Square. Or “the troubled history” of Fillmore Avenue, which started out as a parkway. If you’re deep into Buffalo history you might even find yourself reading the footnotes.