

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

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Caren Yglesias

book review of

*The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System* by Francis R. Kowsky

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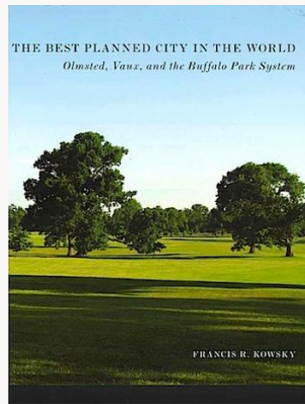
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Francis R. Kowsky,  
*The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System.*  
Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013.  
272 pp.; 119 color; 107 b&w illus.; notes with bibliography; index.  
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Scholars build their skills over a lifetime of teaching, research and writing, and thought. Occasionally, a scholar takes on the formidable challenge of writing the sum of his life's work. In this book, *The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux, and the Buffalo Park System*, Francis Kowsky has done so, and produced a masterpiece. Throughout a professional life spent in Buffalo, Kowsky has garnered an understanding of the city and nineteenth-century American architecture and landscape architecture and its designers, as well as an appreciation of the role of history in preserving social and cultural heritage. This book is a gift to those who are interested in design, cities, and urban life. Kowsky presents the history of Buffalo primarily through the work of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who designed, and thereby defined, the first urban park as a *comprehensive system*. This design is generally considered to be one of their finest designs, and remains, even today, a stellar example of an approach to public space in cities where parks and parkways effectively provide places for passive enjoyment and organized active recreation.

In laying the groundwork, Kowsky briefly reviews early nineteenth-century European parks and how they influenced American expectations about urban design. Perhaps a little more detail would have been appropriate here, as the connection is quite remarkable. Vaux was a young English architect who came to this country when A.J. Downing, the father of American landscape architecture, hired him to join his landscape architecture firm in Newburg, New York on the Hudson Highlands. Downing closely followed the work of J.C. Loudon, England's father of landscape architecture, and designer of Derby Arboretum (1838), the first park designed to be public in England (as opposed to royal parks that were opened occasionally to the public). Both Loudon and Downing wrote about the principles of urban park design and

the urgent need for parks in cities. They advocated for bringing the benefits of the countryside into the city for the purpose of healthful relaxation and elevating civic virtue, as well as practical considerations of managing urban waste and storm water run-off. Tragically, Downing died less than two years after Vaux's arrival. If Vaux had returned to England then, the landscape architecture career of Olmsted may not have materialized, and the impact on the design of American urban public parks might have taken a different direction.

Instead, Vaux remained in the U.S. and continued to practice architecture, eventually moving to New York City where he renewed his acquaintance with Olmsted, who had contributed a few articles to Downing's monthly journal, *The Horticulturist*. Vaux, the architect who appreciated the landscape, and Olmsted, the farmer, writer and superintendent of the work crews for 700 acres of properties being assembled since 1853, fortuitously teamed up in 1857 and won the competition for the design of Central Park. Their on-and-off again partnership continued for thirty years depending on the project; their most prominent designs included Prospect Park and Washington Park in Manhattan, the city of Milwaukee's urban plan, and the planned communities of Riverside, Illinois, and Niagara Reservation, to which Kowsky devotes an entire chapter in this book. Whether Olmsted was originally inspired by his visit to England and Birkenhead as Kowsky states or was influenced by Vaux who carried forward Downing's legacy is a moot point, and has the same lack of consequence as arguments about why Vaux is generally ignored as a designer of Central Park. Clearly this was a productive partnership of the highest order.

Written with the thoroughness of a seasoned historian, the understanding of a local arborist and preservationist, and the practicality of a social theorist, Kowsky tells the story of Buffalo's parks, having combed through what must have been thousands of newspaper articles, reports, and letters. He weaves these first-hand accounts seamlessly into the text. This provides the basis for Kowsky's well-reasoned projections about how Olmsted and Vaux thought the park system would be used as public space, especially in relationship to the urban plan. For instance, when describing the motives behind a design proposal, Kowsky concludes, "For Olmsted, the challenge facing modern cities was to protect such places as the Front so that their citizens might have their spirits raised and their mental balance restored by gazing at natural scenery" (82). Quotations from famous people who visited Buffalo and remarked about the parks are also included, and provide a rich historical context that reflect the cultural sensibility of that time. These words help the reader understand the experience of a design in ways unavailable when looking at drawings and maps because the fine details so ably described in the text are the very things that people notice and remember.

Kowsky's approach not only compares the Olmsted and Vaux designs to what was typically being built in this country (although never with enough detail for this thirsty reader), but also to their proposals for various design projects elsewhere. For example, the 1876 design for the grounds of Buffalo City Hall is compared to the U.S. Capitol grounds design submitted a year earlier, explaining what was particular to each, and what design principles were applied in both. Given the length of time it takes for public works to be realized, and how the scope of the project expands once the impact is realized, such perspective is appreciated.

This book is the first in an intended series titled *Designing the American Park* by the Library of American Landscape History (LALH), and as such it sets a high standard for subsequent

publications. Comprehensive books that have both solid historic information on the social and political context within which public landscapes are built, and an appreciation of the theory behind the proposed designs, allow those facts to transcend particular applications. This is extremely valuable because it helps current designers learn the lessons taught by the pioneers, and develop their work.

It was also a pleasure to read a well-constructed book. Kowsky and LALH secured grants from at least seven trusts and foundations, thereby keeping the cost of this generously illustrated book affordable, even with many color images of exhibition renderings and historic postcards, and the beautifully composed new photographs by Andy Olenick. Happily, the layout design reproduced original Olmsted drawings and maps at a legible size. Several times in the book it would have been helpful to have diagrams explaining the design changes Kowsky described in order for the reader to fully understand the shifts. For instance, a diagram would have clarified the discussion of Fillmore Avenue, which connected the parks and adjacent neighborhoods. Kowsky does help the reader many times when places have changed names over time, and when proposed designs went through multiple revisions and sites shifted. Locations also had changing connections to the extensive rail network that competed for waterfront land and, at times, separated neighborhoods from access to the parks. Kowsky provides rigorously detailed footnotes that document both the information source and provide supplemental detail enriching the narrative text.

Kowsky restrains his comments regarding the current sad state of many of Buffalo's public spaces that have regrettably been neglected or demolished. The concluding epilogue optimistically presents the local historic preservation efforts of the Buffalo Friends of Olmsted Parks, formed in 1978, whose work is being carried on by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservatory since 2000, as well as the National Association for Olmsted Parks. The hope is that cities such as Buffalo will take advantage of the designs prepared by these masters of landscape architecture whose work still speaks to the needs of city dwellers. Kowsky reminds us that parks are not open spaces awaiting development, and that people need trees, meadows, expanses of water, and walking paths, and biking trails. The more dense a city grows, the greater the need. The responsibility of an enlightened public and their leaders is to balance development pressures and the need to expand the tax base with humanity's need for relaxation and enjoyment. Kowsky's masterful book makes the visionary landscape and planning principles Olmsted and Vaux pioneered in Buffalo clear, with the hope that restoration efforts will once again allow it to become the best planned city in the world.

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