

A Buffalo Neighborhood Renews Its Olmsted Legacy (2012)

Humboldt Park, Buffalo, New York

When Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux began work on the nation's first comprehensive municipal park system in 1869, Buffalo was the eighth largest city in the country and one of the busiest ports on earth. Functioning as the gateway to the Midwest via the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes, the city offered the partners an opportunity to improve an existing grid with a green network of parks and sinuous parkways. Late in life, Olmsted declared Buffalo to be "the best planned city, as to its streets, public places, and grounds, in the United States, if not the world."

"The appeal of a lushly planted public landscape attracted upscale development, and soon the works of leading architects from New York City and Chicago were enlivening the city's streets. Into the mid-twentieth century, the parks' mature plantings provided Buffalo's neighborhoods with high-canopied shade, lakes and picnic groves, and miles of walking paths. Two-hundred-foot-wide median strips in the parkways even boasted equestrian trails in a woodland setting, while cars whooshed past on either side.

Olmsted and Vaux, however, did not foresee the trends that cast Buffalo among the financially distressed cities of the "rust belt" in the late twentieth century. Like parks in other large northeastern cities, Buffalo's were neglected and, in some cases, destroyed. The Olmsted legacy faded from popular memory. "When I first moved to Buffalo five years ago, most citizens here didn't even recognize the Olmsted name. That has changed dramatically," says Thomas Herrera-Mishler, president and chief executive officer of Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy. Now the regional convention and visitors bureau, Visit Buffalo Niagara, touts the Olmsted parks among Buffalo's attractions. "This is the green infrastructure that

gives us a competitive edge,” Herrera-Mishler says. The 2011 National Trust for Historic Preservation conference, hosted in Buffalo in October of last year, brought the Olmsted legacy to national attention, featuring park tours by members of the National Association for Olmsted Parks, the Trust for Public Land, and other nationally prominent historic preservation advocates.

Equally important, the conference helped raise local awareness of the park system’s cachet. “The conference brought the valued perspective of experts who recognize these treasures, giving residents a greater appreciation for them,” says Otis Glover, strategic planner and external affairs officer at the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy. “All of our cultural treasures are in the footprint of the Olmsted landscape.” In particular, the attention boosted long-standing efforts by residents to revitalize a predominantly African American neighborhood surrounding one of the city’s principal Olmsted parks, on Buffalo’s east side. Olmsted designed the park, originally known as the Parade, as a military parade ground. It was used for this purpose only once, and in 1896, John Charles Olmsted redesigned it for general recreation, adding three axial water features, including a vast circular pool for wading, toy boating, and skating. Humboldt Basin, at five hundred feet in diameter and five acres in area, remains the country’s largest wading pool. Its grandeur was echoed in other amenities—including greenhouses and a casino building—throughout the park. After its redesign, the park was renamed Humboldt Park, after Humboldt Parkway, itself named after the great explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. Like the system’s other parkways, this was a broad median of wooded trails and grassy meadows, which created a pedestrian and vehicular link to Delaware Park, the system’s anchor.

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