



Calvert Vaux: Architect & Planner

by William Alex and George B. Tatum

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ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO, two men, hardly aware of what they were doing, created a new profession that changed the face of American cities. Lewis Mumford, trying to define this profession, came up with “Geotect.” The two were Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, who together created vast earth sculptures in the midst of urban America, challenging the grid planning then so characteristic. They did not just write and speak of their democratic ideals as abstractions, but consciously tried to embody the social qualities of a democratic society in the physical creation of their parks and parkways. Planner, landscape architect, social practitioner, even Mumford’s geotect are all inadequate designations for their kind of comprehensive creativity.

With this book, Calvert Vaux emerges from the shadows of American history as did Frederick Law Olmsted two decades ago. Vaux—architect, landscape designer and planner, combining talents unique in 19th century America—was, with Olmsted, responsible for the two seminal park designs in the United States: Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. These were prototypical examples that inspired others across the country to do the same.

It was Vaux who succeeded in getting the Central Park Commissioners to set aside an existing mediocre plan for Central Park, convincing them to establish a competition for its design. He then persuaded Olmsted to join him in creating their winning “Greensward” plan. It was also Vaux who devised the preliminary plan for Prospect Park and again persuaded Olmsted to return from California so that again, together, they could perfect and execute the plan. The result in Brooklyn is considered the finest of their creations. And finally, Vaux convinced Olmsted, who then considered himself merely an administrator and manager of men, that they were truly artists, and on a very grand scale.

For the enlightened city fathers of Buffalo, in 1868, Olmsted and Vaux created the first comprehensive city-wide park, parkway and open space system in the United States. In that same year they designed Riverside, Illinois, an example of town planning perhaps not even matched in our own time for intelligence and quality.

In institutional architecture Vaux (pronounced “Vawks”) designed the first buildings for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, as well as a dozen large homes and schools for the New York Children’s Aid Society. Among his private domestic commissions were the Samuel J. Tilden mansion on Gramercy Park in Manhattan and the initial design for Frederic Church’s “Olana,” overlooking the Hudson. His book *Villas and Cottages*, showed many examples of domestic architecture and has had a considerable influence on home

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building along the Eastern Seaboard and as far as California. Popular and influential when first published in 1857, the book has been reprinted frequently.

Calvert Vaux, *Architect & Planner* is the first comprehensive narrative of his work, profusely illustrated with photographs, plans and drawings that show the entire range of his creativity. With this volume Vaux assumes his place at the center stage of American architectural history, a place he so richly deserves.

William Alex is president of the Frederick Law Olmsted Association which promulgates the urban park, planning and environmental ideals of Olmsted and Vaux. He is an architectural historian, writer and editor. He edited the Braziller series of *Masters of World Architecture* and contributed to it *Japanese Architecture*. He produced a series of exhibitions on architecture for the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art and contributed a series of reviews on the same subject for the *NY Times Book Review*.

Professor George B. Tatum has had a distinguished career as educator, writer and architectural historian, authoring numerous books and articles. He taught architectural history at the Universities of Pennsylvania and Delaware and served as president of the Society of Architectural Historians, as chairman of the Advisory Board of the Historic American Buildings Survey and as Chairman of the Commission of the National Museum of American Art. He is an honorary member of the A.I.A.

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