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# Calvert Vaux: Architect and Planner

*by William Alex*

**C**alvert Vaux, architect and planner, is an unjustly neglected nineteenth-century figure. Long overshadowed by his more famous partners, Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted, Vaux has failed to receive recognition as the first professional in America to combine the talents of landscape designer, architect, and planner. Working with Downing during the early 1850s, Vaux established a set of distinctive domestic architectural designs that served as a standard throughout the remainder of the century. Vaux initiated the process that led to the creation of Central Park in New York and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and persuaded Olmsted to join him in both endeavors. Their designs for these two prototypical country parks in the city were of crucial importance in forming the urban face of nineteenth-century industrial America.

Vaux shared the strong reformist impulse that infused many of his contemporaries and saw his work as an opportunity to translate “the republican art idea” into physical form. While the ultimate effect of this effort is still much debated, Vaux and Olmsted created parks that were clear manifestations of a particular notion of the democratizing value of amenable public spaces. Vaux also found an outlet for his concern in designs for shelters for the Children’s Aid Society and for the first buildings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, soon to become two of New York’s pre-eminent cultural institutions. Although Calvert Vaux’s greatest achievements were collaborative, they nonetheless bespeak a creative genius that for too long has gone uncelebrated. Few men of his generation left legacies more magnificent than Central Park and Prospect Park.

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Calvert Vaux, born in London's Pudding Lane in 1824, was trained in the English method as an apprentice to the architect Lewis Hockalls Cottingham. While noted for his careful restoration work on Gothic cathedrals, Cottingham also designed country manor estates. These projects gave his young apprentice direct experience in landscape work, adding to the knowledge Vaux had gained while visiting Europe's grand buildings and gardens during his sketching tour on the Continent. Vaux's American career began when A. J. Downing, the successful protagonist of the picturesque in estate and horticultural design, arrived in London in 1850 to find a professional to transcribe his ideas into the plans and elevations he required for his many clients. The Secretary of the Architectural Association there recommended Vaux, whose drawings were on exhibition in the Association's gallery. The two went to the gallery, where Downing hired Vaux on the spot and brought him back to Newburgh-on-Hudson. In a few months Downing, whose earlier architectural collaborator Alexander Jackson Davis had declined a partnership, made the talented Vaux a partner in the "Bureau of Architecture."

In Newburgh, the enterprising Downing generated numerous commissions for domestic architecture in the Hudson Valley and East Coast cities and gave Vaux the opportunity to show his skill in residential planning in general and masonry construction in particular. When President Fillmore asked Downing in 1851 to lay out the public grounds in Washington between the Capitol, the Smithsonian Institution, and the White House, Vaux worked as his assistant. Although he was already involved in the planning of estate grounds and in the orientation of houses along the picturesque Hudson Highlands, Vaux gained valuable experience in landscape design on a larger scale while working in Washington. The brief partnership between Downing and Vaux flourished: their architectural conceptions and plans became more clearly rationalized, their details surer, and their use of elements of European form more apparent, presumably due to Vaux's English background and Downing's own visits to Europe. When a steamboat explosion and fire took Downing's life in 1852, Vaux completed their commissions, working with Frederick Clarke Withers, another English architect Downing had engaged for the expanding office.

Sensing the greater potential for his career in New York City, Vaux moved there in 1856, the same year he became an American citizen. One year later *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* featured Vaux's work in a series of articles which formed the core of *Villas and Cottages*, one of the most influential domestic design model books of the

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Victorian era. First published in 1857, the book contained fifty designs and was frequently reprinted over the next two decades; it was reissued as recently as 1970. In *Villas and Cottages* Vaux first voiced his belief in the unique opportunity America provided for artistic advancement, a theme that would recur in his later writing and work. "There has not, indeed, been, from the commencement of the world till this moment," he wrote, "an opportunity for the advance of the fine arts so replete with the material of true success as now exists in America. This advance is a question of choice, not time; of purpose, not ability; of direction, not force; there is capacity enough spread over all the country, and being wasted daily: it is conviction and will that is needed."

Conviction and will, as well as powerful abilities of persuasion, were qualities Vaux demonstrated in full measure during his successful campaign to convince the commissioners of Central Park to establish a competition to determine its design. Declaring that the plan put forward by the Park's chief engineer, Egbert L. Viele, was "a disgrace to the memory of Mr. Downing," an early advocate of the Park, Vaux next persuaded a hesitant Frederick Law Olmsted to join him in submitting the "Greensward" plan. Following this design's selection from among the thirty-three submissions in April 1858, Vaux and Olmsted proceeded to implement their concept. After only four years of construction, the progress inspired *Harper's Monthly* to note: "The Central Park is the finest work of art ever executed in this country . . . the exquisite forms of the ground in every direction—the perfection of the roadwork and gardening—the picturesque and beautiful bridges—the lovely sweeps of water contrasted with lawn banks—the pictorial effect of the terrace upon the water, so that you drive out of the City into the landscape. . . ."

Although the Civil War slowed the development of the Park, Vaux continued his work and also undertook several architectural commissions. Olmsted left New York, first to work for the U. S. Sanitary Commission in Washington and then to assume the superintendency of the Mariposa mining estate in California. Toward the end of the War, Vaux was asked to provide a plan for Prospect Park in Brooklyn, again to replace an inferior design. His basic conception was approved, and once again he turned to Olmsted, who returned to New York and joined him in the creation of what is probably the most admired of their urban parks.

The byplay between the two men at this juncture in their careers provides insight into a complex working relationship that seems to have been characterized by Vaux's vision of the transcendent value

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of their work and his frequent exhortations that the sometimes reluctant Olmsted share his vision. Writing to Olmsted in California in 1865 to persuade him to return and work on Prospect Park, Vaux characterized him as a vital partner “. . . in regard to the main point, —the translation of the republican art idea into the acres we want to control.” When they were appointed Landscape Architects to Central Park a short time later, Vaux wrote, in the belief that they might now actually exercise control over the Park’s construction and management: “You are, and I am, and several other people are necessary to this work, and it can be successfully carried through in an artistic spirit to a real end . . . but it depends on you—and the spirit in which you now approach it. . . . I am willing to contribute all I can. Are you content to do the same?”

For the next several years Olmsted was indeed “content to do the same,” and the partners devoted their energies to the promulgation of their particular vision of the “artistic spirit.” Olmsted, Vaux and Company, by then nationally famous, went on to do a number of large parks in major American cities. In New York they designed Morningside, Riverside, and Fort Greene. Elsewhere, they created Delaware Park, the first metropolitan park and parkway system for Buffalo; South Park, a major complex in Chicago; and a town plan for Riverside, Illinois, that resulted in what is still perhaps the most environmentally enlightened suburb in the United States. Although the firm was dissolved in 1872, the two principals later joined to do a few projects, including the General Plan for the State Reservation at Niagara and Downing Park in Newburgh in honor of Vaux’s first partner.

The “artistic spirit” that seemingly moved them in many of their projects had many components, not the least of which was the concept of uplifting social reform. It failed, however, to shield them from the machinations of most of the local New York politicians. After Olmsted’s removal from the superintendency of Central Park in 1876, Vaux was to spend most of his time thereafter in New York battling to protect his and Olmsted’s parks against short-sighted and venal municipal officials intent on misusing city parklands. While this struggle vitiated his creative energies, it failed to temper his idealism.

Vaux reached the height of his career in the early 1870s. Throughout his partnership with Olmsted, Vaux had continued to conduct an active architectural practice, even while he embellished their parks with bridges, buildings, terraces, rustic shelters, boathouses, refectories, and other necessary amenities. Later, in partnership with Frederick Clarke Withers and George R. Radford, an engineer from

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England, he designed a series of major hospital-asylum complexes that incorporated new and enlightened building techniques. His competition entry for the Main Building of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, although not selected, received extraordinary notice for its innovative design and the boldness and scale of its conception. In 1874, he designed the first buildings for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History. The noted artist Frederic E. Church called on Vaux to prepare the initial design for "Olana," his villa on the Hudson, and ex-governor Samuel J. Tilden had him combine two row houses on Gramercy Park into a single grand residence (now home to the National Arts Club).

Vaux's clients were not confined to the well-to-do. In 1879, Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children's Aid Society (and college roommate of Olmsted's younger brother John), engaged Vaux to design the first of an eventual dozen shelters and schools for the Society. Vaux's thoughts on the Society, if ever expressed, have not survived. Doubtless, however, he approached these efforts to help alleviate the pressing problems of New York's homeless, abused, and sick children with the same reform impulse that had earlier shaped his work on the great urban parks. Additional expressions of his social conscience included his design in 1882 of a model for decent tenement housing for the Improved Dwellings Association of New York, a design which echoed his unrealized plan of twenty-five years earlier for the first apartment building in New York.

Early in his career Vaux had enunciated principles and beliefs by which he abided till the end, long after society in America took pathways he could or would not follow. In *Villas and Cottages* he observed the driving force in America toward "money-making" for its own sake, noting that the fruits of wealth and money were not directed toward the increase of excellence in "literature, science and art" for the general benefit of a democratic society. Whether or not Vaux really anticipated the achievement of a "higher national excellence" in his adopted country, he was motivated by his beliefs and convinced of the basic validity of his principles and surely aimed at realizing them in his own fields of endeavor. Apart from his professional work, Vaux participated in the civic, artistic and cultural life of New York. As a member of the Century Association and clubman, he mixed with the intellectual elite of the City. He was also closely involved with *The Fraternity Papers*, a literary publication which he and Mrs. Vaux helped edit and to which he contributed essays, poems, and drawings.

With hindsight, Vaux's early years were perhaps his most satisfying

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professionally. “Algonac,” “Springside,” “Idlewild,” “Olana,” “Ammadelle,” “Ashcroft,” and the other country estates he designed throughout the Hudson River Valley and elsewhere for his rich urban clients displayed a comfortable use of the Rural Gothic and Italianate Villa styles. These styles, so appropriate to domestic architecture, evolved into the Victorian High Gothic when he later undertook his large urban commissions. Unfortunately, the prevailing taste for a classic, imperial architecture that better represented the pride and success of America’s new money-makers made Vaux’s persistence in adhering to his own architectural creed an anachronism he could ill afford. While he continued to be respected for his artistic, technological, and sociological achievements, he received fewer and fewer commissions in the last years of his life.

Calvert Vaux died in 1895 and with him died much of the substantive record of his professional accomplishments. With few exceptions, his papers and personal memorabilia have disappeared due to death and accident. In recent years, however, previously unknown works by Vaux have been periodically uncovered and have increased our appreciation of his enormous achievements in parks, architecture, landscape design, and planning. His is an artistic patrimony created for New York and the nation of which we can justly be proud.