

## **Olmsted Park and Parkway System for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **Introduction**

Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of North American landscape architecture, gave Buffalo, New York, the first city-wide park and parkway system in the United States. Between 1869 and 1915, he, Calvert Vaux and later with the Olmsted Brothers, designed six major parks, an array of smaller parks and greenspaces, and a network of parkways and greenways, connecting the various parts of the city and given neighborhoods access to green areas. Unfortunately, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the system began to deteriorate due to overuse, collapsing municipal budgets, road projects and Dutch elm disease.

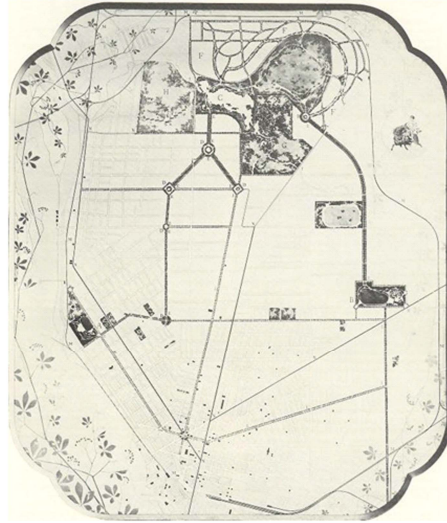
The following paper outlines the steps – small and heroic – taken to restore the historically significant parks starting in the 1970s with a friends group and covering the most recent master planning effort, the restoration and management plan for the Buffalo Olmsted Park and Parkway System.

### **Background**

This story begins with Frederick Law Olmsted’s vision of new urban form -- of green space woven into a city fabric. When the city leaders brought Olmsted to Buffalo, NY in the 1860s to replicate the successful Central Park of NYC, he transcended the Central Park concept that he and Calvin Vaux had designed and implemented. Instead, he envisioned not a place, but a system -- a system of green that would be accessible to citizens throughout the city (Kowsky 1991). The Buffalo Park and Parkway System was Olmsted’s first experiment with bringing together a collection of spaces and uses from different points in the city, connected with his uniquely designed “ribbons of green.” The greenway concept proved to be hugely successful and Olmsted later transferred his ideas of parks and parkways to other cities all over the United States.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Buffalo parks were deteriorating, a victim of neglect, overuse, and suburbanization. Active sports and their facilities made incursions into parks Olmsted intended for more unstructured pursuits. Parts of parks, especially the greenways, were appropriated for automobile traffic. In response, a broad-based citizen’s movement organized itself to restore this urban treasure. In the 1970s, the Friends of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks were formed and in 1982, achieved recognition for the system on the National Register of Historic

Places (O'Donnell 1979). This small grassroots organization grew in sophistication, competence, and fundraising capacity in parallel to the U.S. movement of cultural landscape preservation in general and the importance of Olmsted specifically. In 2004, the group, in their new capacity as the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, assumed management responsibility for the system.



**Figure 1: Olmsted's parks and parkways in Buffalo (1874)**

### **Goals and Objectives**

In this new and officially responsible position, the Conservancy set about to develop a plan for the park and parkway system. Using the success of the work of the Central Park Conservancy (1985) as a model, the Conservancy initiated a planning process for the large park system consisting of 846 acres in the six major parks and 6.4 miles of parkways. Given the size of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks system, the extended period of neglect, and the chronically under-funded state of municipal budgets, it was a challenge to create a plan that would be both visionary and credible as a path to the future.

To assure the plan was well related to the planning framework of the region, the Conservancy engaged The Urban Design Project (UDP) to assemble an interdisciplinary team to build the plan with them. UDP was a prime author of the city's international award winning planning framework including both its *Buffalo Comprehensive Plan* (2006) and its downtown strategy, *The Queen City Hub* (2003). Both of these documents employed the park system as a core element in the planning strategy.

The planning challenge was, at least, threefold. First, the Conservancy had to restore the historic integrity of a unique cultural landscape while continuing to meet the

recreational needs of current residents. Second, they needed wide public and official support in creating a credible plan for a huge park system in which the price tag for a minimally adequate restoration would begin in the tens of millions of dollars. And third, the historical artifact had to become more sustainable and ecologically intact to expand its environmental services as well as to cut maintenance and operations costs.

One of the first steps was the articulation of the principles for the future of the parks. These goals were developed in collaboration with the board of the Conservancy, the long-range planning committee, the involved municipalities and the public. These principles outlined a framework for:

1. protecting and rehabilitating the park system,
2. ensuring safe, secure, diverse and equitable use,
3. involving partners and ensuring meaningful community participation,
4. promoting sustainable design and management strategies,
5. expanding the park system through new regional connections,
6. using the parks as community and economic development tools,
7. and managing the system through daily best practices

### **Methods**

Because the Olmsted parks represent 60% of all the city's parks, it was critical to frame a story about the uniqueness and importance of the Olmsted park system, but also to articulate its deterioration in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. And like all good planning stories, there was a rescue by a broad-based and long-running citizen movement that became the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, the first non-profit to manage a city-wide park system.

The Urban Design Project (UDP) recommended approach built on the history of the Conservancy as a grassroots organization and on the planning history of each park. This open process acknowledged dependence on the public and financial support of the community. Some years before the plan initiation, the Conservancy organized a Citizen's Advisory Group that worked with UDP to address individual park and systemwide issues. It was this body that formed the basis of the plan's Citizen's Advisory Board, who were involved throughout in the planning process and played a leadership role by hosting the public meetings held across the city.

As important as the public planning process was -- and without it there would be little hope of implementation -- it would be a gratuitous gesture without historic and empirical research, its integration, analysis and synthesis. The plan was built on a meticulous and comprehensive historical survey of the parks, their design, construction, development, and deterioration over time. Part of the analysis was documented through a series of Photoshop overlays in which maps or diagrams and later aerial photos were used to portray every intervention in each park on a year by year basis. Every building built or removed, every square foot of pavement laid

down, and every tennis court and statue inserted into the parks was documented. This allowed the planners to make a considered judgment about what was the appropriate *status quo ante* to which each park element should be restored – an evaluative task that is at the heart of the preservation enterprise.

An array of data was collected on existing conditions of the system. This included a survey of park users as a means to better understand future needs, an environmental resources inventory, and an analysis of the existing physical and socio-economic conditions of neighborhoods surrounding the parks. All of this Buffalo specific work was placed in the larger context of research on parks that demonstrates that well-maintained parks and green spaces provide great economic gains, including increased property values and decreased health care costs (Crompton and Nicols 2005; Harnik 2003; Scherer 2004).

One of the guiding principles identified was the requirement that restoration and management must address environmental sustainability. Olmstedian designs were responsive to natural processes, but were limited by the knowledge of the time. New knowledge, skills and techniques were introduced without compromising the system's historic integrity to promote ecological restoration and green design (American Forest 2003).

The plan employs a full historical range of illustrative techniques from handmade plan drawings patterned on Olmsted's original style to a three-dimensional digitally projected model that allows citizens to hover above images of the parks and see existing and proposed conditions toggle in and out. Indeed, the 3-D modelers combined 19<sup>th</sup> century techniques with 21<sup>st</sup> century technology by using the Olmstedian plan drawings as their base, providing participants in the planning process with an extraordinary ability to see and compare historic, existing, and proposed conditions. The computer technology was employed not only as a communication device, but also as a form of analyses to understand the integration of various data sets as they were located on the ground.

## **Results**

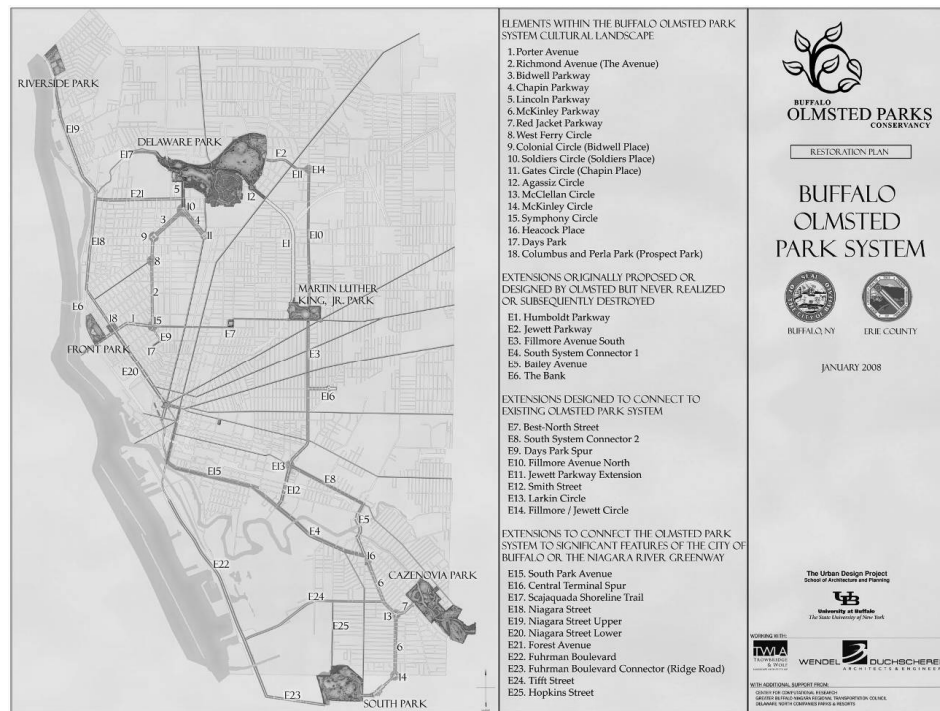
*The Olmsted City* offers a vision of the future and at the same time, is a tool for day-to-day management and operations. It shows the direction the parks should go by community consent, and it sets priorities for where to begin. The cost estimate for a full restoration of the parks exceeds a quarter billion dollars; another \$175 million in transportation and connectivity projects are also included in the plan. But an immediate five-year capital program to “fix the basics” and meet other critical needs is less than \$30 million, with two thirds of that amount already in place by 2009. The plan describes the total need but prioritizes and scales the possible responses according to available resources. The document guides the mobilization of a strategy to direct scarce public resources and to generate additional private and philanthropic dollars for its implementation.

The public engagement approach successfully avoided pitting the competing constituencies against one another by bringing together the golfers and

preservationists, dog walkers and environmentalists, softball leagues and neighborhood associations in a single Citizens Advisory Group. This group helped define the values and strategy for restoration of a historic resource that is also a resource for structured recreation. One of the most significant products of the collective work was a policy that “historically inappropriate park elements be removed as soon as the activities served could be accommodated in new facilities and spaces elsewhere.” In other words, the plan met conflicts by scheduling their resolution over the life of the plan, and more broadly, left open opportunities for continuing participation by all constituencies.

Because the Olmsted system stretches across the city, many levels of government were involved at strategic points in the planning process. *The Olmsted City*, as an adopted element of *Buffalo’s Comprehensive Plan*, is aligned with other public priorities for economic development, neighborhood revitalization, waterfront reclamation, and transportation improvement – including a program for linking Olmsted parks and parkways with a broader regional network.

It is also guided by sustainable design principles. The plan makes the argument that parks bring wealth by providing valuable ecological services, including clean air, clean water, storm water management, flood control, climate control, and habitat. Sustainability is evident in proposals for constructed wetlands and restored woodlands and meadows using native plant species, and integrated pest management strategies that eliminate the use of harmful pesticides.



**Figure 2: The proposed fully restored and expanded Buffalo Olmsted Park and Parkway System.**

## Discussion

*The Olmsted City* successfully addressed the principles outlined at the beginning of the management and restoration planning process by developing strategies for historic park protection, equitable and fair use, a collaborative planning process, sustainable and best management practices, and the promotion of parks as community and economic development tools. *The Olmsted City* stands as both a product of the work of a citizens' movement and as its instrument. The plan captures the vision of the people of Buffalo for a renewal of the parks system that gives their city character and shape, and it expresses the values they hold for parks as an historical but living part of the city.



**Figure 3: Delaware Park, the largest of the six primary parks in the Buffalo Olmsted Park and Parkway System.**

Planning and plan documents provide an invaluable resource for groups and individuals who aspire to shape the future. Given the growth of the city since the system construction, remaining true to the original Olmsted vision required it to be expanded and completed to fit the geography of the contemporary city and region. Thus, part of the planning and revised mission of the Olmsted Parks Conservancy includes major connections to other existing greenways. The plan proposes new pathways to enlarge the necklace of green to connect not only the original six Olmsted parks, but the new green spaces of the city. In Buffalo, Olmsted gave us a lasting gift we are obligated to preserve. But his heritage goes beyond that. His work itself promotes the impetus for each generation to create and build a vision for those who follow. Therefore, the mission of the Conservancy and the City of Buffalo is not only to preserve the historic parks, but to expand the vision of Olmsted to leave a legacy for the next 100 years. This is also an aim of *The Olmsted City: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in its proposal to extend the greenways and make new connections to the more contemporary green infrastructure and the Niagara River/Lake Erie waterfronts.

## Concluding Thoughts

The exercise of generating a plan on the scale of *The Olmsted City* has raised a series of questions regarding the work of landscape preservationists – not only with respect to *The Olmsted City*, but in general. We suggest that cultural landscapes require the simultaneous embrace of past/ present/ future generations, places and uses. This is perhaps easier said than done as many conflicts and tensions emerge in the balance of these requirements across the spectrum of time and space.

*The Past:* Any landscape declared a ‘cultural landscape’ has a history, sufficiently significant for a cultural designation. Our responsibility as professionals and citizens is to call out these places and whenever possible, to restore and maintain the intentions and structures of the original landscape, finding ways to tell their stories through the articulation of form and processes. One of our tasks is to work with those who claim pieces of the world as sacred; identifying landscapes that should be protected from our ceaseless unmaking of the world.

*The Present:* Yet, clearly, most of us do not live in a museum, but in active, inhabited worlds that must accommodate the activities of the living. And so cultural landscapes must meet the needs of current generation of users. How this can be done without compromising the original landscape is one of the key issues in planning all cultural landscapes, even those that are to be used as museums and protected areas.



**Figure 4: Colonial Circle connects Richmond Avenue with Bidwell Parkway, two of Olmsted’s green ribbons through the city.**

Another issue is how to address the preservation of a place, its form, organization, intentions and practices while meeting up-to-date best management practices for landscape sustainable/ecological processes, for building code compliance, and health and safety concerns. Bringing a landscape up to contemporary and cutting edge practices may be in conflict with the original premises of the designer or the practices of the era from which the landscape emerged.

*The Future:* If we decide that a place/landscape is worthy of our collective attention, we also have the responsibility to see that it continues to be cared for in the future. Developing the institutional capacity and funding to restore, maintain, and operate is a critical task in this regard. The same creative energy needed to physically restore

the landscape must be employed in the development of institutional structures. Without this framework, the articulation of the fabric of the cultural landscape will be lost to future generations, and with the disappearance of the physical traces, the stories of people and place are lost.

Another future challenge for landscape preservationist is this: how do we create this generation's legacy – places and stories that will become the cultural landscape of the next 100 years. Is there a way to think about the preservation of the past that not only brings those places into the present and future, but does it in a way that enriches, expands, and connects to other stories, to this generation's concerns and lives?

Each of these issues had to be addressed in making the plan, *The Olmsted City – The Buffalo Olmsted Park System: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Within the planning framework, many of these questions were discussed and considered and the plan itself is fairly successful in addressing the tensions inherent in the sometimes oppositional requirements of the past/present/future. The task in front of the Conservancy and its aspirations for the Buffalo green necklace and the task for all professionals and citizens concerned with cultural landscapes is the management of these aims in the implementation of the plan. The plan is in place; now the work of preserving and advancing the vision of urban and metropolitan Olmsted Park and Parkway System is before us.

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