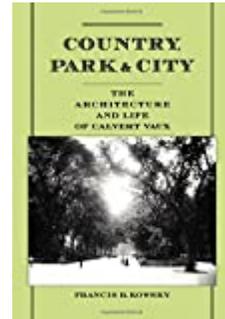




**Francis R. Kowsky.** *Country, Park, and City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. ix + 378 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511495-9.



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## Vaux Reappraised

During the course of his long and productive career as one of America's preeminent architects and landscape architects, Calvert Vaux (1834-1895) shaped the landscape of some of this country's most important nineteenth-century cities. Yet, because of his partnerships with more famous figures, first, Andrew Jackson Downing, and later, Frederick Law Olmsted, Vaux's influence on the landscape architecture was largely forgotten in the twentieth century. Francis R. Kowsky's comprehensive biography, the first on Vaux, firmly fixes the architect as a major force in the development of the professions of architecture and landscape architecture in the United States. Although some readers may not be convinced by the book's speculations that Vaux was an idealist who labored throughout his life to improve conditions for the lower classes and to advocate art education for all, Kowsky, a professor of art history at the State University of New York College of Buffalo, provides the most complete overview to date of Vaux's achievements, with much analysis of the influences guiding the architect's work.

Kowsky organizes the text chronologically in nine

chapters; the first follows Vaux from his youth in London to his architectural apprenticeship with Lewis Nockalls Cottingham, a leader of the Gothic Revival movement, and his fateful meeting with Downing in 1850. By this time, Downing's writings, most notably his two major works: *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841 and later editions) and *Cottage Residences* (1842 and later editions), had already had a significant impact on the growing class of American homeowners. In the summer of 1850, Downing traveled to England to study buildings and landscapes, and to find a young architect with whom he could build the architectural side of his practice in Newburgh, New York. Vaux quickly accepted Downing's offer of a position and arrived at Downing's home and office, Highland Garden, within three weeks of having met him.

Chapter Two discusses the work that Downing and Vaux produced together between September 1850 and July 1852, the month of Downing's untimely death. Although Downing was clearly the head of the firm, he needed an architect of Vaux's caliber to undertake the architectural commissions flooding the office Kowsky ar-

gues that, in the absence of any schools of architecture in the United States at the time, Vaux had “a command of the Romantic tradition of design that in the early 1850s surpassed that of any of his contemporaries on this side of the Atlantic” (p. 5). By the end of 1850, Downing had made Vaux his partner. Because no papers survive from Downing and Vaux’s partnership, much speculation remains as to the extent each man had on the firm’s architectural commissions. The primary source for documenting projects during this period is Vaux’s book, *Villas and Cottages* (1857). Kowsky asserts “that soon after his arrival Vaux took major responsibility for architectural work in the office” (p. 28). He notes that the drawings and plans of buildings designed by Downing and Vaux, Architects, depicted in *Villas and Cottages* display “the influence of new modes of Gothic, French, and Palladian design and possess more tightly organized plans and a sense of larger scale” than had Downing’s designs before his collaboration with Vaux (p. 28). This conclusion counters those offered in recent books on Downing, most notably David Schuyler’s *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852* [1], which suggests a more equal collaboration between the two men. Schuyler argues that *Villas and Cottages* offers only a partial collection of the firm’s work and, thus, cannot be considered as representative. He further suggests that Vaux published his book to affirm his place as Downing’s successor and, by presenting mostly large residential commissions by Downing and Vaux, Architects, to attract affluent clients rather than those of modest means.[2] Certainly, it is clear that after Downing’s death Vaux wished to redefine the practice he had shared with Downing; however, more work remains to be done in untangling the confusion regarding the firm’s work between 1850 and 1852.

Chapters Three and Four cover the six-year period of Vaux’s life and career after Downing’s death. Vaux remained in Newburgh until 1856 when he moved to New York City. During this period he established a lasting relationship with the landscape painter Jervis McEntee, married McEntee’s sister, Mary, and oversaw a flourishing architectural and landscaping practice. By 1856, Vaux, in the midst of supervising the construction of his design for the Bank of New York, realized that in order to obtain important public and private commissions he would have to move to New York City. In America’s largest city, Vaux entered the center of New York’s art world and became an early member of the American Institute of Architects, formed in 1857. That same year, the publication of *Villas and Cottages* gave Vaux a national reputation as a leading architect. But the most important

event in Vaux’s life that year was the competition for the design of Central Park. He enlisted Frederick Law Olmsted, at that time the superintendent of labor for Central Park, to be his partner in preparing a plan for the park, because Olmsted had extensive knowledge of the site’s topography. The plan the men submitted, known as the Greensward Plan, proposed a Romantic scheme with innovations, such as placing cross-town roads below grade to separate heavy traffic from pedestrians, horses, and carriages.

The plan won the competition, and Vaux and Olmsted embarked on a long partnership together during which time they shaped the nation’s ideas of the role public parks should play in the life of cities. Because the plan was submitted jointly, the individual contributions made by each partner has always been unclear. Kowsky argues that Vaux must have been the leader on the project; certainly in 1857 he had more experience in landscape design than Olmsted, and there is no reason to doubt that Vaux designed the numerous stone and iron bridges throughout the park (pp. 98-104). Nevertheless, by 1858, the park’s commissioners had made Olmsted “architect in chief” with Vaux employed as his assistant. Though Olmsted took great pains in later years to emphasize Vaux’s significant role in the design and development of the park, Vaux always felt slighted at the lack of recognition he received. In Chapter Five, Kowsky focuses on the Terrace (1859-c. 1864) which he calls “the architectural centerpiece of the Central Park landscape and Vaux’s most important work” (p. 119). In this structure one sees the full convergence of nature and architecture that Vaux hoped to achieve.

Chapter Six analyzes Vaux’s architectural commissions during the Civil War period. This was also a time when Vaux and Olmsted ended their partnership. Shortly after the war’s conclusion, however, Vaux set his sights on designing the proposed Prospect Park in Brooklyn. He persuaded Olmsted to return from the West, where he was supervising a mine in California. Kowsky makes clear that Vaux needed Olmsted not only to design Prospect Park, but also for a larger purpose—to guide the American park movement and promote the profession of landscape architecture. Olmsted did return to New York; Chapter Seven discusses the plan Vaux and Olmsted proposed for Prospect Park, as well as other major park systems in the immediate post-Civil-War years. Here, the author does a superb job in explaining the grand vision the partners had for the park and for the layout of Brooklyn, still largely undeveloped in the 1860s. Most importantly, Vaux and Olmsted wished to link park develop-

ment with urban planning, specifically through a system of parkways that would connect suburban, residential neighborhoods to each other and to the parks themselves. Though the partners did not get their chance to realize this vision in Brooklyn, they did have an opportunity to implement a citywide park and parkway system for Buffalo, laid out in the early 1870s. Despite this period of intense activity, Vaux and Olmsted again ended their partnership, in 1872, though they continued to collaborate on specific projects over the next two decades. By this time it was clear that Olmsted needed to pursue his own landscape architectural practice, while Vaux would focus on architectural commissions.

Chapters Eight and Nine cover the last two decades of Vaux's career and life. Although the early 1870s were productive years for Vaux, it was apparent by the latter part of the decade that his adherence to the High Victorian Gothic Style, in the face of rising popularity for the Neoclassical, had made his work appear outdated. Having won the commissions, with the High Victorian architect J. Wrey Mould, for the new American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and for building the first phases of each, Vaux subsequently lost commissions for later phases of both projects, in part because of the mixed reviews the buildings received. As his ability to win large commissions declined, Vaux turned to designing several lodging houses and other buildings for the Children's Aid Society in New York City. He also spent the last eight years of his life working for the New York Department of Public Parks as landscape architect, enabling him to design numerous small parks throughout the city, as well as to resume work on Central Park. He collaborated with Olmsted on a plan for the Niagara Reservation around the falls, and, most fittingly, on a park in Newburgh dedicated to Downing. At his death in 1895, Vaux no longer commanded a leading role in architectural developments in America, but he had left a long legacy of projects.

In his thorough recounting of Vaux's life and career, Kowsky does an admirable job of returning Vaux to his rightful place of leadership in the nineteenth-century American park movement. He builds extensively on information presented in William Alex and George B. Tatum's *Calvert Vaux: Architect and Planner*,<sup>[3]</sup> providing much more detail on individual projects and clearing confusion on aspects of Vaux's career, such as his relationship with Olmsted. In addition, Kowsky meticulously discusses the intent of the architect. Though most of Vaux's papers are lost, the plans he prepared for a variety of projects allow Kowsky to analyze the proposals

for sites, including Prospect Park and Fort Greene (Washington) Park, both in Brooklyn, and Newark, New Jersey's park system. Nevertheless, the absence of Vaux's papers, combined with the loss of the papers of Downing and Vaux, Architects, will continue to make the assessment of Vaux's contributions to works with Downing and other partners a murky subject of inquiry for years to come. There are areas in the book, however, where, despite the absence of conclusive documentation, Kowsky succeeds in establishing Vaux's role. An excellent example is his discussion of the conception and construction of Olana, the home of the landscape artist Frederick Edwin Church, in Hudson, New York. Though Olana is clearly the product of Church's own vision, Kowsky indicates Vaux's hand in shaping Olana's framed views of the Hudson River, comparing them to earlier views in other homes along the Hudson designed by Vaux (pp. 212-13). In his assertion that Vaux was a social reformer, Kowsky is less successful. Though Vaux argued for art education and outdoor recreation for America's children in *Villas and Cottages*, and later designed many buildings for the Children's Aid Society in New York, he also sought numerous commissions to design the homes of wealthy individuals and promoted the development of middle- and upper-class suburbs in his plans for Brooklyn, Newark, and Buffalo. Although these projects are not mutually exclusive in the career of an architect, the tenacity with which Vaux pursued prestigious commissions from wealthy individuals suggests that his role as a social reformer needs to be investigated further.

For a book that depends so much on visual images of Vaux's projects and on his plans for parks and buildings, the reproductions in *Country, Park, and City* leave much to be desired. The plans are too small to be read easily and many details are lost. For better reproductions, the reader should turn to Alex and Tatum's *Calvert Vaux* which has large, clear images, many in color. Another welcome addition would be a chronology of Vaux's works indicating the fate of his buildings and landscapes.

*Country, Park, and City* succeeds in reviving Calvert Vaux as a major figure of nineteenth-century landscape architecture. Though many of his projects have been lost, enough remain to remind us of the enormous contribution he made to shaping America's parks and cities. It is hoped that future scholars researching Vaux will build on Kowsky's work, placing Vaux in the larger context of nineteenth-century American history and further analyzing the extent of his influence.

Notes:

[1]. David Schuyler, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Architect and Planner* (New York: Ink, 1994).  
*Downing, 1815-1852* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[2]. Schuyler, 181-184.

[3]. William Alex and George B. Tatum, *Calvert Vaux:*

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