



The Dual Career of Calvert Vaux, Architect and Landscape Architect

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When Calvert Vaux (1824–1895) immigrated to America in 1850 from his native Britain, he found that the modern arts of architecture and landscape architecture were in their infancy here. Over his long career, which ended with his death in 1895 at age seventy, he worked to put both disciplines on a firm professional basis. He took pride in his training in London with Lewis Cottingham, a Gothic Revival architect well known for his buildings and medieval restorations. Cottingham also possessed an extensive library, where Vaux steeped himself in British literature on landscape design and picturesque scenery. Travel on the Continent taught him further understanding of parks and gardens.

In America he would practice both architecture and landscape architecture with equal force and devotion. In New York, where he spent most of his life, he prepared the original plans for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History. Had his proposal for the main pavilion of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition been carried out, it would have been the most spectacular structure the nation had yet seen. As a designer of landscapes, Vaux worked shoulder-to-

shoulder with Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852) and Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), both of whose reputations have endured better his. In his later years he mentored Samuel Parsons Jr. (1844–1923), who would carry Vaux’s Romantic vision of nature and landscape design into the twentieth century.

Vaux’s American career began in the summer of 1850, when Downing came to London in search of an architect to work with him in his new business venture of designing houses and grounds. Downing, who had gained a national reputation through his writings and editorship of the *Horticulturist* monthly, engaged Vaux without hesitation after meeting him at the Architectural Association. By the fall, Vaux had joined Downing at his home and office in lovely Newburgh, New York. This prosperous town, some sixty miles north of Manhattan, was the queen city of the Hudson Highlands. Together, the two men received many commissions for residences, but the most important job came in 1851, when President Fillmore approved appointing Downing to lay out the grounds between the Capitol and the White House. As the nation’s first major public park project, it provided Vaux with unprecedented experi-

ence in the challenge of constructing extensive pleasure grounds. Tragically, the work came to a halt after July 1852, when Downing lost his life in a steamboat disaster. Vaux stayed on in Newburgh, where he continued to attract patrons for suburban residences, especially in the Hudson Valley, whose beautiful scenery held an enduring attraction for him.

In 1856, Vaux moved to New York and the following year published *Villas and Cottages*, a handsome portfolio of small and large houses that he had designed (some as Downing's partner and later with Frederick With-

ers, another British architect who had come to work with Downing). In words and images, Vaux explained how, together with modern comfort, he had sought to establish a pleasing relationship between a dwelling and its surroundings. He prodded his readers to join hands with nature in the outward appearance of their homes and condemned the popular taste for white exteriors. Vaux summed up his philosophy with the statement "woods, fields, mountains, and rivers *will* be more important than the houses that are built among them."

With a Romantic's sensitive eye for natural scenery, Vaux paid careful attention to views when laying out the plans of his houses. His riverbank dwelling for William Findlay in Newburgh featured a cross-axial plan that allowed for "an extensive vista . . . through the house" in two directions. The arch of the entrance porch held the vista of the Hudson like a picture in a frame.

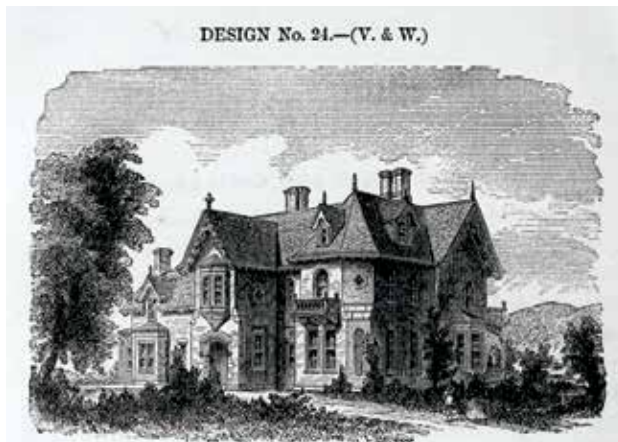
When he first took on the commission from Lydig and Gertrude Hoyt for a house in Staatsburg, Vaux recounted how he roamed the property (now within Norrie State Park) until, with "due deliberation *pro* and *con*," he fixed upon the most appropriate location for the dwelling, one that would provide its residents with river and Catskill views "in every respect delightful." On a summer evening, guests might step out onto a terrace sheltered by a roof held in place by chains, so that no posts would interfere with the majestic panorama.

And the modest board-and-batten cottage and studio Vaux designed at Kingston for his brother-in-law, the painter Jervis McEntee, surveyed an "extended view of the Catskills and the Hudson," scenery that Vaux regarded as "of the most striking and varied description." He knew it well, for his family was close to the McEntees, and he and the artist often went on sketching trips in the Catskills. Vaux numbered other Hudson River School artists among his clients, notably Frederic Church, who hired him to help site and design the main house at Olana, Church's dream estate in Hudson, New York, which commanded many picture-perfect prospects.

Together with explaining his thinking on domestic architecture, Vaux wanted *Villas and Cottages* to be a statement about professionalism. On coming to the States, Vaux had found the "system of remuneration defective and unsettled." At the back of the book, he published his schedule of charges for designing a dwelling. For plans and specifications, he required 2.5 percent of the total budget, for detail drawings, 1 percent, and for superinten-

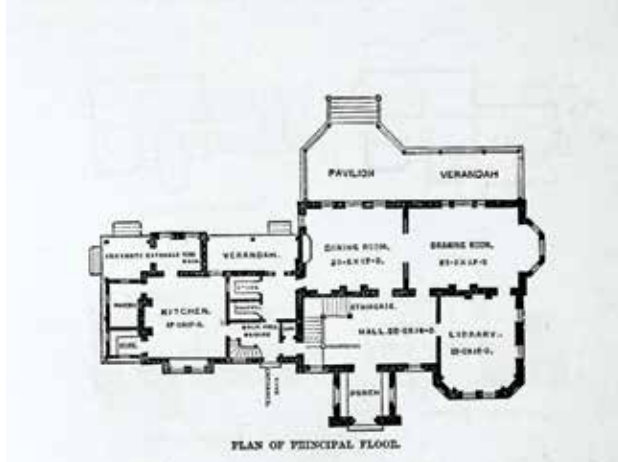


DESIGN FOR AN ARTIST'S STUDIO.



DESIGN No. 24.—(V. & W.)

PERSPECTIVE VIEW.



PLAN OF PRINCIPAL FLOOR.

"Design for an Artist's Studio" for Jervis McEntee (courtesy Buffalo & Erie County Public Library) and Design No. 24, from *Villas and Cottages*, Andrew Jackson Downing, 1857.



Sitting room, Olana State Historic Site. Photograph by Peter Aaron/OTTO.



Landscape, Jervis McEntee, oil on canvas, n.d. Cincinnati Art Museum.



Oak Bridge, Central Park. OPPOSITE: Bethesda Terrace, Central Park. Photographs by Sara Cedar Miller/Central Park Conservancy.

dence, 1.5 percent, for a total of 5 percent, which, he stated, was “the usual commission of architects.” By insisting on a set standard of compensation, he hoped architects would become recognized as professionals, as his father, a surgeon, had been. “I refused all business not in the plan I determined on,” Vaux later told Olmsted. Vaux joined others in this nascent striving for professionalization, and in 1857 he was among the group of New York architects who began meeting to establish professional standards. They soon constituted themselves as the American Institute of Architects and adopted the same scale of charges that Vaux had printed in *Villas and Cottages*.

For a number of years, New York City had been talking about establishing a large public park. Downing had even written a famous essay advocating it. In 1853 state officials approved funds to purchase more than seven hundred acres of land in the center of the island and hired a military engineer to devise a plan for Central Park. Dismayed at the lackluster design, Vaux used his reputation

as Downing’s former partner to have the commissioners reconsider their decision and throw the design open to a competition. In the fall of 1857 he approached Olmsted, whom he did not know but whose 1852 book *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer* he admired, to join him in the preparation of a competition entry.

At the time, Olmsted had charge of the labor force preparing the ground for the construction of the new park. Working at Vaux’s home late into the night, the men created an entry they submitted under the name “Greensward.” With consummate artistry, they would coax recalcitrant land into becoming a pastoral *landscape*, a “country park,” the fictive setting of a non-urban world in the heart of the bustling city. Somewhat to their surprise, the Greensward plan won out over some thirty-two other entries.

The Central Park design had been a true collaborative effort; neither man claimed more credit than the other—a fact that, to Vaux’s dismay, many later com-



mentators would lose sight of. To the enterprise Vaux brought, in addition to his admirable aesthetic sense, practical experience working on the Washington park project and designing landscapes around houses he had built, as well as an architect's knowledge of design and construction methods, which Olmsted lacked. Vaux would be responsible for the structures that were eventually erected within the park, including enchanting rustic summerhouses tucked away in leafy corners and charming varied bridges that assisted the partners' innovative "separation of ways" system of winding walks and drives that let people amble the landscape without fear of encountering a carriage or equestrian.

Vaux insisted that these structures, like the houses he had designed, be "subordinated" to their natural surroundings. To many physical features the partners (and perhaps mostly Vaux, who had a poetical turn of mind) attached evocative names, such as the Dene, the Ramble, and the Loch. The list of titles reads like a table of

contents to a volume of pastoral verses. It was, in Vaux's words, to be "Nature first and 2nd and 3rd—Architecture after a while." Many of Vaux's structures were enhanced by splendid nature-inspired ornament created by the genius of the British-born architect Jacob Wrey Mould.

The construction of Central Park, which began in 1858, marked the true beginning of the public park movement in America and the genesis of a partnership that would place Vaux and Olmsted in the forefront of that movement. Yet the trajectory of their reputation faltered when Olmsted went off to Washington in 1861 to serve the war effort as executive secretary of the US Sanitary Commission and then, in 1863, moved with his family to California. He went there, like so many others, to seek his fortune in gold mining. Vaux regarded Olmsted's decision to leave Central Park as a grievous personal mistake and a betrayal of the budding discipline of landscape architecture.



Bridge No. 28 (Gothic Bridge), Central Park. Photograph by Sara Cedar Miller/Central Park Conservancy.

During these years when their paths in life became widely separated, Vaux did his utmost to bring his friend back to their former partnership and to what Vaux saw as his true calling. In a series of ardently written letters, he told Olmsted that he believed God had put him on this earth to devote himself to landscape architecture. “He cannot have anything nobler in store for you,” he wrote. In addition, if not for himself, Olmsted owed it to the emerging profession he represented to return. “You have allowed yourself to stand before the Public as Architect in Chief of the Central Park and it is useless to argue that no responsibility attaches to you,” he argued, and then went on to reflect on the future:

The Gold mine people and the oil people get rich, most of the artists remain poor, except they prostitute their abilities. In a properly civilized republic this should not be, in our republic it need not be if representative men were only true to their (implied) oaths of office. The designers of the Parks if successful in one way should be successful in the other. In the present state of art development in the country, it is very necessary . . . to protect the strictly legitimate pecuniary interests connected with the pursuits they follow for each in turn must be proved to be profitable or young men of ability will be deterred from venturing into it.

Vaux felt that it would be “a burning shame and a reprehensible mistake on our part if the Central Park slips up as a confused jumble of which there is nothing quotable as precedent, that will help our successors.” Vaux held that their work at the park should be the means of elevating landscape architecture, “an unaccredited but important pursuit,” to a place among “the best interests of humanity.”

In Vaux’s view, their work at Central Park had laid the foundations for a new discipline, which he insisted, over Olmsted’s initial objection, on calling “landscape architecture.” Olmsted seemed to see the challenges they faced more in terms of management and administration. But Vaux argued that foremost they were artists, and that “it is the art title we want to set out ahead, and make it command its position [above] administration, management, funds, commission, popularity and everything else. . . . As administration with art attached as makeweight, the thing is in [the] wrong shape.” He even

chided his former partner for his workaholic preoccupation with organization, recalling his dismay at finding Olmsted at Central Park with his “porcupine arrangement of Foremen’s reports 70 to each pocket and one in your mouth so that you never had a word to say to a friend.”

While he was writing to Olmsted, Vaux was negotiating with the city of Brooklyn to design a vast new park there, to be called Prospect Park. By the summer of 1865 he had determined boundaries and the general outline of a plan. He hoped that the potential of a new park job with a different group of commissioners from those who had aggravated them at Central Park would entice Olmsted to come back from the West. When Vaux also secured the partners’ reappointment to Central Park, Olmsted finally relented and returned to New York, where he resumed their partnership and the career that would make him famous in the annals of American culture. He later admitted that had it not been for Vaux, “I should not have been a landscape architect, I should have been a farmer.”

Under the firm name Olmsted, Vaux & Co., the two men went on to design Prospect Park, the Buffalo park and parkway system, and other public and private landscapes, including Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, where Withers designed the buildings. The partnership endured until 1872, when they parted amicably. Olmsted eventually left New York for Brookline, Massachusetts, where he established his home and office at Fairsted. Vaux would stay on in New York, and from 1881 until his death he served as landscape architect with the Department of Public Parks. He spent much of his time defending the original Greensward plan from unsympathetic changes and additions. Vaux groomed Samuel Parsons Jr. to be his successor at Central Park and was gratified to see his son Downing (1856–1926) grow into a talented landscape architect. They worked together on a number of projects. Downing continued his father’s efforts to establish landscape architecture on a professional basis and, in 1899, joined with ten others, including Olmsted’s two sons, to found the American Society of Landscape Architects.

On two important occasions, Vaux teamed up with Olmsted again: the pro bono design of Newburgh’s Downing Park, a memorial to his first partner, and the efforts to preserve and restore the natural scenery at Niagara Falls, which had been marred by ugly industrial buildings and honky-tonk attractions. (Vaux also



Downing Park, Newburgh, NY. Wikimedia Commons.

early on called for the preservation of the Hudson River Palisades and the Kaaterskill Falls.) After New York State established the Niagara Reservation (now Niagara Falls State Park) in 1885, the commissioners engaged Olmsted and Vaux to devise a plan for the grounds. “It is the most difficult problem in landscape architecture to do justice to,” Olmsted wrote; “it is the most serious—the furthest above shop work—that the world has yet had.” He marveled at Vaux’s ability to size up a problem and come up with a brilliant solution.

The result of this last collaboration of two of the greatest minds in nineteenth-century American art was their *General Plan for the Improvement of the State Reservation at Niagara* (1887). In it they laid out a system of walks and drives that encouraged the many visitors to experience in a leisurely way the treasure of natural attractions that accompanied the spectacle of the Falls at Terrapin Point: wild rushing rapids, rare wildflowers, old-growth woodland, and “much else that is undefinable in conditions of water, air, and foliage.” As for

Vaux, he approached the task the way he had done others throughout his career as a landscape architect: “In every difficult work,” he once wrote, “the keynote of success of course lies in the idea of thorough subordination, but it must be an intelligent penetrative subordination, an industrious, ardently artistic, and sleeplessly active ministry that is constantly seeking for an opportunity to do some little thing to help forward the great result on which Nature is lavishing its powers of creation.”

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Horseshoe Falls from the Three Sisters, Harry Fenn, watercolor, 1893. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.