

Review: *A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era*, by Robin Karson, Library of American Landscape History with the University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.

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In the years between the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and the end of the Great Depression in 1939, the amassing of vast fortunes led to the creation of elaborate estates in affluent enclaves around the country. *A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era* is a study of the extravagant domestic landscape architecture of those years, beginning with the work of Frederick Law Olmsted and ending with Fletcher Steele and the early stirrings of modernism. The author, Robin Karson, focuses on seven well-documented estates and eight influential landscape architects. Through their work a wide-angle image of the period clearly emerges.

The title of the book references two pivotal historic signposts of landscape architecture: Norman Newton's term *Country Place Era* and Alexander Pope's *genius loci*, the particular inherent character of the site, or what Olmsted termed "local circumstances." It is the thesis of this study of the Country Place Era that the success of the best estate designs derived from the ability of the landscape architect to identify the *genius loci* and exploit it to great advantage.

A fortuitous convergence of factors in the Country Place Era created the perfect climate for landscape architecture writ large. Unprecedented personal fortunes were made in a dizzying boom of industrialization, but at the same time the first symptoms of environmental and social costs were acknowledged. A growing nostalgia for the pastoral life, as well as admiration for villas and châteaux seen on European travels, inspired a fabulously wealthy class to create personal paradises of unprecedented scale and limitless budget. This happened at the moment when the profession of landscape architecture fully emerged, credentialed and legitimized, and produced many of its greatest talents.

Expanding on the scope of her earlier books, including one devoted to the landscape architect Fletcher Steele and another to the garden design of the estate of Gwinn, Karson addresses the wider phenomenon of the Country Place Era. Beautifully produced and generously illustrated, the current book is a dense yet accessible study of one of the most colorful moments in American landscape architectural history. Augmenting the more than 350 vintage photographs, drawings, and plans are beautiful contemporary photographs of each landscape by Carol Betsch. This thoughtful addition anchors the disparate sites and stories to the present. It also provides a remarkable testament to the uncommon survival of the great landscape legacies of the Country Place Era and, by implication, points to the urgency of preserving others. This, as part of

the preservation of the entire heritage of American landscape design, is a primary mission of the Library of American Landscape History, founded by the author, which co-published this book with the University of Massachusetts Press.

In an unconventional format, the book is organized in three chronological sections, within which are a total of eight biographies of landscape architects and detailed histories of seven of their exemplary estate designs. The latter contain substantial profiles of the clients and their milieu, an essential thread in the fabric of the story. The Vanderbilts, the Du Ponts, the Sieberlings, and the Fords were all collaborators as well as clients. Involved, opinionated, and well informed, they were not only enormously wealthy but also enlightened participants in the design of their estates. Indeed, throughout the seven estate histories, a surprisingly consistent phenomenon occurs that is one of the most interesting revelations of the book: The best of these landscapes benefited from, perhaps depended upon, the felicitous alchemy of the collaboration between the client and landscape architect.

There is an enormous amount of information – an almost indigestible number of names, sites, and histories within histories within histories. At times, the book bogs down in distracting tangential detail. Ultimately, however, what emerges is a carefully articulated portrait of American estate landscapes, those who built them, and how they were designed. Departing from the manageable scope and resultant narrative tone of her earlier books on the same period, this ambitious study reads as a reference work with many layers of material, much of it revelatory and surprising.

In an introduction, the author reveals that a determining factor in the choice of the seven sites she discusses was the requirement that a significant amount of the original landscape be intact in order for it to be observed at first-hand and photographed. This is a departure from the conventional historiography of landscape architecture, which relies heavily, if not exclusively, on historical documentation, so rarely do more than traces of the original designs endure.

Not insignificantly, these are all well-documented sites, for which deep stores of archival materials have survived. Much of the color of the book – the biographies of the clients and the landscape architects, the histories of their collaborations, the evolution of their designs, even their successes and disappointments – could only have been constructed from a trove of correspondence, office records, manuscripts, clients' archives, and ephemera. This rich variety and depth of documentation, going far beyond that offered by limited conventional records, has resulted in a complex, nuanced study.

The client profiles in the landscape essays add a valuable dimension often lacking in other accounts of the design process in landscape architecture. As this was a particularly collaborative generation of ambitious clients and

designers, the profiles are a compelling part of the story. Making especially skillful use of the correspondence between clients and designers, Karson illuminates the process behind the evolution of each project. Drawing from her in-depth knowledge of landscape architect Warren H. Manning, about whom she has previously written in *The Muses of Gwinn*, she gives a particularly fine description of the design of Gwinn, with a detailed but fluid portrait of the collaboration between Manning, the architect Charles Platt, and William Gwinn Mather, the client. The correspondence between Edsel Ford and Jens Jensen, for another example, reveals Ford as an active, even intrusive, client. Ford's insistent preference for open space and lawns made Jensen's design for the Fords' Grosse Pointe site quite unlike his other work. Exploring Dumbarton Oaks with Karson, we learn that there were many conflicts of taste between Mildred Bliss and landscape designer Beatrix Farrand throughout their long collaboration, but in the end Farrand thanked her client for "many hours of common work and common delight." At Naumkeag, Mabel Choate and Fletcher Steele were friends and collaborators for thirty years. A charming 1938 photograph shows them together, painting the famous Blue Steps that Choate had asked Steele to design for access to her cutting gardens.

Another surprise is the social and professional genealogy of the seemingly small world of landscape architects, artists, writers, publishers, critics, and patrons. Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, the critic and writer on architecture and landscape, was a friend of Beatrix Farrand's family and perhaps one of her early mentors. Rose Standish Nichols, garden designer and critic, was sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens' niece. Landscape architects Fletcher Steele and Helen Bullard both worked for Manning, as did Dan Kiley, one of the masters of early modern landscape design. Manning himself had worked in the office of Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of landscape architecture in America. Dozens more such connections are revealed through the book.

The segue from the profession's almost exclusive employment on lavish private estates to landscapes serving the general public was not as abrupt as might be presumed. Indeed, the Country Place Era and the Progressive Era were overlapping. Many of the clients shared with their landscape architects an emerging consciousness of the reform agenda of the Progressives, including the need for civic planning and the provision of housing and parks for the working classes. For example, Frank Sieberling, Manning's client and the founder of Goodyear Rubber and Tire Company, was inspired during the building of his country house, Stan Hywet, to address the dearth of housing opportunities for his Akron factory workers. He asked Manning to help design Goodyear Heights.

With the changing economic realities in America following the Great Depression and the Second World War, the civic sphere, not the lavish personal estate, was to be the next frontier for the profession of landscape architecture. As if in anticipation of the transition of their beautiful homes and gardens to public

stewardship, many proprietors of Country Place Era estates were active proponents of the creation of municipal and state parks and participants in the City Beautiful and regional planning movements. Karson's magisterial book shows the magnitude of the Country Era landscape heritage and confirms its importance as a major chapter in the history of American landscape design.

– Leslie Rose Close