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Susan L. Klaus, *A Modern Arcadia: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the Plan for Forest Hills Gardens*. Published in association with Library of American Landscape History, University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. 165 pp., photos, drawings, plans, maps. \$39.95. ISBN 1-55849-314-X (hardback)

*A Modern Arcadia* is the first full-length study of Forest Hills Gardens in Queens, Long Island, a garden suburb begun in the early twentieth century renowned for its uniform architecture and park-like setting. The Russell Sage Foundation, founded in 1907, paid for the design and construction of Forest Hills Gardens. Philanthropist Margaret Olivia Sage began the foundation with sixty-five million dollars of her husband's fortune and the objective of the "improvement of the social and living conditions in the United States of America." One of the Sage Foundation's first major initiatives was to plan a suburban community located on the fringes of New York City. Forest Hills Gardens was to become a prototypical suburb that would set new standards for suburban design for the rest of the country. Those standards were to include well-designed homes, sound real estate economics, and an attractive, as well as functional, landscape plan. Through the creation of the Sage Foundation Homes Company and the investment of nearly one-sixth of its capital, the Foundation sought to make low-cost housing available and make a profit for itself. Economically, Forest Hills Gardens was not a success. The Foundation lost about \$300,000. In terms of its design, however, it remains one of the best examples of the garden suburb in America. This was primarily due to the work of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and architect Grosvenor Atterbury.

As her subtitle suggests, Susan Klaus is particularly interested in describing the role of landscape architect Olmsted in the creation of Forest Hills Gardens. The series editors have an agenda beyond the history of the suburb, and that is to give the reader a "wider understanding of the principles of suburban planning" with the hope that "this understanding will bear fruit in the work of developers, planners, architects, and landscape architects" (p. x). To this

end, Klaus focuses her considerable research skills on the documentary record left by Olmsted, his firm, and the records of the Sage Foundation Homes Company. The book's greatest strength is that Klaus highlights the extraordinary career and talents of the younger Olmsted. There is no question that he was greatly influenced by the work of his father and the years spent as his apprentice, but he forged a new path in the nascent field of city planning unimagined by his father. Olmsted Jr. was committed to professionalizing the field of city planning and landscape architecture.

Klaus shows that in the design of Forest Hills Gardens, Olmsted developed a comprehensive and unified plan within a hierarchy of street widths, flowing and curvilinear roads, seasonal planting schemes, and open spaces. These features were inspired, in part, from the suburban work of his father at Riverside and Roland Park, but they were also a product of twentieth-century concerns for rational planning, infrastructure, and the City Beautiful movement. Olmsted was also influenced by events abroad, as were most architects and planners at this time. English sources such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City and the design of Hampstead Garden Suburb, and German sources such as the work of Camillo Sitte, were certainly in Olmsted's mind. Grosvenor Atterbury most visibly expressed the evidence of those sources in the architectural designs. My main criticism of the book is that Klaus relegates the discussion of architectural detail and design to the background because of her focus on Olmsted. The effect is to minimize the role of architecture in the overall success of the suburban principles she wishes to elucidate. The real success of Forest Hills Gardens is the way in which buildings and landscape were carefully orchestrated; therefore the two subjects deserve equal time. There is also a lack of discussion about house plans and interior designs.

Olmsted believed that the comprehensive plan was the most important characteristic contributing to the success of Forest Hills Gardens, and as Klaus points out, was employed for good effect by Olmsted at Palos Verdes Estates in California, and Mountain Lake in Florida. Klaus finds the same principle underlying the modern communities of Seaside and Celebration, Florida, and suggests that planners and architects revisit Forest Hills Gardens for guiding principles. This raises the question of whether it is realistic to seek design principles in a model suburb with roots in the nineteenth century and a wealthy benefactor who paid for such talented designers. Is it possible to establish principles for suburban planning when the context is ever changing and the needs of American families—the primary constituency—are also ever changing? Would present-day families be content with the relatively small houses on compact lots that characterized Forest Hills

Gardens? Probably not. Today we are dismayed at the proliferation of large houses on small lots yet how do we change the inherent attitudes that fuel the desire for mega houses? It seems that the issues are more complex than aesthetics alone and that architects and planners need to consider the underlying cultural and social values. The assumption of *Modern Arcadia* is that if we establish good design principles and raise the bar on our aesthetic standards, people will respond in a positive way. Yet, Klaus herself points out that there are critics of the "new urbanism" who dislike the artificiality and storybook character of these planned communities (p. 159). She acknowledges that there are "challenging social, economic, and environmental issues facing us today," most of which were never considered by Olmsted and Atterbury (p. 161). Architects and planners should look at suburban models such as Forest Hills Gardens for basic principles, but critical issues such as declining resources and population density are central concerns and need to be considered in neighborhood planning and design. The principles outlined by Klaus in *A Modern Arcadia* are an important first step, but they will only go part way in addressing the inadequacies of modern-day suburban planning.

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