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Fletcher Steele, Landscape Architect: An Account of the Gardener's Life, 1885-1971

By Robin Karson. Second Edition, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003; 368 pp., illustrations, bibliography, notes; paper \$34.95.

Robin Karson, in this revised edition, has truly captured the life and aspirations of Fletcher Steele. Steele's artistry in estate gardenmaking (and a few public spaces), from the 1920s into the 1960s, influenced modern landscape architecture. Karson traces the phases of his career from the earliest influences in his life to the last designs he completed, spanning nearly a century. With each phase, Karson provides ample descriptions through 50 of the most noteworthy garden designs utilizing Steele's own photo library, his original plans and sketches, correspondence, and articles in which he expressed his design theories. The design process is clearly articulated from inception through completion, combining his artistic intent, his patron's desires, and the site constraints to ensure that the patron and designer are satisfied with the outcome. This book is a rare glimpse inside the life of one of the great early American landscape architects who bridges the gap between Beaux-Arts and modern landscape design.

Before this first edition was published in 1989, Steele was largely forgotten. Karson's book renewed interest in his work and the notable designs that he created. His most well-known proj-

ect, Naumkeag, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, was the cornerstone of his career. For Naumkeag, Karson provides an insightful presentation of the 30-year design development of Mabel Choate's property and Steele's relationship with his "great design partner, patron, and friend." Starting in 1926 with the design of the Afternoon Garden and ending in 1955 with the completion of the Moon Gate in the Chinese Garden, the most recognizable feature of the garden became the Blue Steps. In 1938 Choate announced that she was tired of risking her neck on her daily treks to the cutting garden. Choate stated: "I...told Mr. Steele he must make me some steps that would be both convenient and easy.... Little did I realize what I was in for." Steele created four sections as he describes it, "each one having a couple of steps and turns, two ramps...and a graduated flight of half a dozen steps to a platform. The latter go up over an arched opening in which is a dripping fountain and pool." White iron railings accentuated the sweeping curves of the steps and archway descending down the slope. Surrounding the staircase, Steele planted a grove of white bark birch trees. The final idea was to paint the steps and archway openings a bright blue. Hailed as the signature work of Steele's career, the steps are featured on the cover of the book.

Choate's and Steele's concern over Naumkeag's future preservation resulted in Choate's bequest of the property to the Massachusetts conservation organization, Trustees of Reservations. Steele certainly influenced this decision since he acted as an advisor and committee member for the organization for a number of years. The foresight of Choate and Steele some 50 years ago left Steele's most notable design preserved for future generations.

Karson's very readable book captures the voice of Steele and the patrons that accepted him as family. As a charismatic writer and speaker, he was sought out by the foremost landscape architecture programs to provide his always insightful, though not always popular, viewpoints. His association

with the Garden Club of America was his most lucrative, leading to a number of designs for club members.

Through his speaking engagements and writings, he also influenced a new generation of landscape architects, including Daniel Kiley and Garrett Eckbo, who became leading modernists after World War II. Steele was ahead of his time and presented his ideas on modern garden design in several articles starting in 1929 for *House Beautiful* and in 1930 and 1932 for *Landscape Architecture*. In his 1932 essay titled "Landscape Design of the Future" he wrote—

In my opinion, the architect is primarily interested in the objects which he is designing: the landscape architect with the relation of things and the compositions of the spaces between them... I believe that successful space composition will be the next serious preoccupation of landscape architects. The difficulties of composing space are greater than the mere design of objects in and around its enclosed volumes, especially in our art which rarely offers us more definite roof than sky....

Steele was known as a perfectionist, dominating, and very unpredictable, yet he was loved by "rich little old ladies." For the most part, he lived as he preached in his quest for beauty through the artistic arrangements of the gardens he designed.

Karson presents an engaging biography, gracefully written and supported by numerous photographs, plans, and sketches. Although beyond the scope of this book, Karson nonetheless expresses some concern about the current condition of Steele's designs. She laments the destruction of two of his most treasured designs, where wrecking crews wiped away everything that took years to create, removing them in a matter of days. This leaves the reader with questions about the fate of Steele's other 700 landscape designs. Karson's extraordinary book serves to encourage the preservation of Steele's other significant landscape designs. All in

all, Fletcher Steele valued quality and would be pleased with Karson's presentation of his work.

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