



FELICE FRANKEL

When Robin Karson set out to document the career of Fletcher Steele, a major American landscape architect, her goals were lofty: to produce a monograph based on an art historical methodology using a new technique that presented the design process as a narrative; to create a book steeped in exhaustive research accessible to the layperson that would make Steele's work more widely known and better understood (and therefore ultimately better protected); to offer an assessment of a practitioner whose work has been pivotal in the development of the American style of garden design; and to address the subject of landscape architecture as a fine art, distinct from the coffee-table-book tradition of treating gardens merely as pretty pictures. Ambitious? Yes. But, the jury agreed, a resounding success as well.

"A remarkable piece of scholarship," was the consensus, recognizing *Fletcher Steele, Landscape Architect: An Account of the Gardener's Life, 1885-1971* with an Honor Award. Jurors were also "engaged by the graphic quality" of Karson's book, especially impressed by the integration of scholarship with a "very attractive book." A traveling exhibition on Steele's work that Karson organized to promote interest in it also won praise from the jury.

The award culminates several years of concentrated effort clearly evident in the book. Once Karson had found grant support for her four years of research and for the reproduction of archival photographs and negatives, her next task was to locate all the material she could find relating to Steele's life and work: to visit the important extant gardens designed by Steele and photograph them; to interview everyone she could find who had known Steele; to cull through his clients' correspondence, newspaper clippings and Steele's notebooks (the book includes a "judicious and enlivening use of his comments"); and to read all Steele's writings, published and unpublished. Karson was also responsible for selecting the 250 images to be used, determining their size, placement and captions, and for the editing and indexing of the entire book.

It was well worth the effort. In addition to a host of rave reviews in the press—from the *New York Times* to *House and Garden*—Karson has received appreciative communications from other quarters. Steve McMahon, superintendent of Naumkeag, Steele's largest surviving garden, and the Mission House, both now owned by the Trustees of Reservations and open to the public, writes: "Before [Karson's] book, each decision regarding the replacement of a horticultural or architectural element was faced with much dismay. . . . By reading and then using *Fletcher Steele*, my staff and I were able to gain insight into Steele's design criteria and how he applied them to these particular properties. We were able to use the book as an excellent reference for conveying the need to devote greater attention to the gardens and how to accurately decide what should be replaced and why. Having decided the properties' direction for ourselves, we are now better able to clarify our interpretation to our visitors and impart the importance of Steele's work to these properties."

"This book has increased our exposure to the public in many rewarding directions. . . . Since its publication, and in conjunction with the American Horticultural Society exhibit on Steele, our exposure has reached a greater audience and intern applications for this year have tripled. Volunteer participation has also noticeably increased."

Author: Robin Karson
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Opposite: The Blue Steps at Naumkeag, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Left: Charlotte Whitney Allen garden in Rochester, New York