

Robin Karson

**A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era**

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (in association with the Library of American Landscape), 2007, xxiii + 428 pages, 483 b/w illus. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 9781558496361

In 1971 landscape historian Norman Newton suggested that a focus on country estates would lead to an impression that landscape architecture was “geared solely to magnificence for the opulent few” (xiv). Nevertheless recent historians have discovered a remarkable breadth in the period Newton named the Country Place Era. Mark Girouard’s *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*<sup>1</sup> and Mark Alan Hewitt’s *The Architect and the American Country House: 1890–1940*<sup>2</sup> established the country house as a significant domain of research. Robin Karson’s *A Genius for Place* significantly contributes to this research by expanding it to the landscape. Her book raises the standards for research in the history of landscape architecture while encouraging future scholarship.

In 1904 Barr Ferree defined “the great country house as . . . a new type of dwelling, a sumptuous house . . . placed on an estate . . . with a garden which is an integral part of the architectural scheme” (xvi). Hewitt considered the landscape an essential element, although primarily a setting for the architecture. By focusing on the partnership of patrons and landscape architects, Karson, who has written extensively on Fletcher Steele and serves as executive director of the Library of American Landscape History, selects seven examples organized chronologically into three parts, each of which is focused on a decade of design between 1910 and 1939. The individual sections offer biographies of the landscape architects and discussion of design and construction. Drawing on diverse resources, including her own previous publications, Karson identifies the gardens at Gwinn (1907–1912) and Stan Hywett Hall (1912–1915)

as representative of an emerging American style. Both were designed by Warren H. Manning, Charles A. Platt, and Ellen Shipman. Dumbarton Oaks (1920), the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House (1926–27), and Winterthur (1926–27) are used to discuss innovation in work of Beatrix Farrand, Jens Jensen, and Marian Cruger Coffin. The final section considers Val Verde (1925–1935) by Lockwood de Forest and Naumkeag (begun in 1926) by Fletcher Steele, analyzed as early investigations of modernism and abstraction.

The essays are informative, providing fresh insights into the designers and designs. This is no simple feat, as Farrand and Jensen have been the focus of monographs, as have Dumbarton Oaks and Winterthur.<sup>3</sup> Karson offers additional insights into how the designers were informed by their professional communities and how they challenged contemporary practice. For example, whereas Farrand’s design for Dumbarton Oaks is often described as more formal near the house and more informal and naturalistic in the park, Karson points out that a small woodland was originally brought right up to the house. Others have noted this, but Karson situates the observation within the context of the contemporary discussion of the use of the wild garden as a type within diverse landscapes. This is rarely considered in the literature of landscape history.

While Karson’s choice of sites seems reasonable, the book is as much focused on promoting a preservation agenda as on critical analysis, and so she has selected only projects that retain considerable spatial integrity and are open to the public. She writes in part “to provide useful context to the stewards of these landscapes.” (ix) Having begun as a catalogue for an exhibit that opened in 2000, the multiple purposes for the book—history, description, and stewardship—are both a strength of the project and a challenge. The book will serve as an excellent resource for the stewards of historic landscapes. As a historical work, it is a substantial contribution, even if it does not reflect the breadth of practice or the diversity of designers who practiced during the period.

Expanding on Hewitt’s scholarship, Karson considers the role of the emerging profession of landscape architecture in the early twentieth century, when, for the first time, patrons were able to select professional designers to develop their landscape

visions. Karson attempts to describe concerns and intentions of the young profession as its members shaped private estates, public spaces, and institutional landscapes and made the transition from Olmstedian traditions to twentieth-century modernism. She engages the issues of professionalism, class, gender, and the influences of modern art and literature. The progressive agendas of patrons and designers enhance the narratives. While understanding these contexts is key in the study of landscape history, the limited selection of sites under study makes these discussions seem forced at times.

Karson’s book features duotone photographs by Carol Betsch, and like Robert Cheek’s photographs for Hewitt’s book, these are combined with archival images. This pairing provides a rich dialogue across time, an important perspective as landscapes are necessarily engaged in growth and change and thus can be hard to interpret. Betsch’s photographs are often full page, and one wishes a similar treatment had been given the archival images, including those by notable photographers Mattie Edwards Hewitt and Samuel Gottscho. Color would have added much to the descriptions of gardens by Shipman and de Forest as well.

The field of landscape architectural history is still establishing its place in the academy. Recent monographs on landscape architects include those on Farrand, Coffin, Steele, the Olmsted Brothers, and Charles Platt. Two books, Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller’s *The Golden Age of American Gardens* (1989) and Denise Otis’s *Grounds for Pleasure* (2002), set a broad stage for a more inclusive history of garden and landscape design. Karson’s book, joining other recent publications in the Library of American Landscape History, is an essential contribution that offers much to the scholar as well as to the landscape architecture student and practitioner, while simultaneously suggesting a wealth of future research projects. There is still a need for more comprehensive study of American landscape architecture, and one hopes that a reader of this book will take up the challenge.

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