

## Books

A section for the review of books is a regular feature of *Landscape Journal*. The opinions and ideas expressed in the reviews are those of the reviewers and do not necessarily represent the views of the *Journal*'s editors or the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture. Suggestions for books to be reviewed are always welcome, as are comments regarding the reviews published. All correspondence should be sent to the book review editor:

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

by Robin Karson with photographs by Carol Betsch. 2007. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 429 pages. b&w contemporary and historic photographs, maps, plans, sketches. \$65.00 cloth.

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Reviewed by Frances G. Beatty

The country place era (c.1900–1940) is one bypassed and somewhat dismissed by the profession of landscape architecture. In Robin Karson's most recent book *A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era*, she seeks to illuminate the central design tenets of the most notable works of the time period and make a case for their cultural relevancy. Karson reveals the contexts and landscape ideals of the gardens, the owners, and the designers. We may still marvel or criticize the opulence, extravagance, and excessiveness of the properties; however, the lessons on the history of the profession and the art of landscape architecture are new ones. Or, latent ones made clear. The highly wealthy and politically connected upper society members, such as Henry F. Dupont and Edsel Ford, informally functioned in a Medici-like manner in their patronage of new residential garden expressions. They were fueled by the need for grandeur and comfort, coupled with the luxury of pursuing their horticultural curiosity. The result was an application of European and Mediterranean garden ideas on spatial forms and details in the American landscape. The garden designers themselves were members of this

echelon, thereby enabling them to pursue a non-traditional approach to livelihood: landscape architecture.

Karson partnered with photographer Carol Betsch to tell the story of eight designers and seven gardens in three parts: "An American Style," "Innovation and Wildness," and "Dreams and Abstraction." By not wedding herself to a single narrative, she is successful in presenting a series of "short stories" that interface with each other either in personality or ideology. Each short biography and each garden description stand individually. Obviously, the reader will understand the era better by taking the entire literary journey. The designers presented are: Warren H. Manning, Charles A. Platt, Ellen Shipman, Beatrix Farrand, Marian Cruger Coffin, Jens Jenson, Lockwood de Forest, Jr., and Fletcher Steele. Their design ethic and client/collaborators are revealed through these residential gardens: Gwinn, Cleveland, Ohio; Stan Hywet Hall, Akron, Ohio; Dumharton Oaks, Washington, DC; Winterthur, Winterthur, Delaware; Edsel and Eleanor Ford House, Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan; Val Verde, Santa Barbara, California; and Naumkeag, Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Each chapter includes a significant number of illustrations. Historic photographs and plans are complemented by Betsch's contemporary black and white images of these historic places. She sought to capture the poetic beauty of the gardens themselves. For example, *Fireflies in Old Meadow, Midnight, 1990 at Winterthur* conveys the ephemeral (216). A diffused tree-lined horizon sets the stage for a field framed by listing dark-shadowed stone gateposts and a pointillist arrangement of firefly lights in the foreground. Betsch captures the experience of a moment. Several of her works are presented on the full page, which facilitates the photographs' purpose to make an emotional impact. The historic plans are helpful in conveying the overall structure of the site and gardens. However, the historic planting plans are too small to be legible, such as Ellen Shipman's planting plan for the English Garden at Stan Hywet Hall. Nonetheless, overall there is as much information in the 481 photos, plans, and sketches as in the cogent narrative.

The book's purpose is ambitious. Karson states that she seeks to interpret the estates' designs, connect them to the context of other landscape works of the era, reveal their connection to the artistic and intellectual atmosphere, and illuminate the ethos—"spirit of place"—inaugurated by Olmsted; as well as, illustrate how the hold of the agrarian myth became more tenacious (xv). She opens with a prologue offering the

genesis of American landscape architecture, Olmsted's legacy, and cultural underpinnings for the turn of the century. For each estate, Karson describes the education of the designers and the artistic influences of the owners—mostly Western European gardens and Beaux-Arts principles. Karson is successful in revealing the integral role of the client in the design's development. The intimate intellectual and artistic partnership with the designer was often eclipsed by the determination of the owner, who tended to dictate aesthetic and horticultural directions.

Appropriately, Karson dedicates significant space to horticultural frameworks and details; an often neglected element in design descriptions. Through the horticultural lens, Karson reveals how women entered the gardening and landscape architecture profession. We learn, or are reminded, that Shipman and Coffin often worked with their male counterparts and undertook the extensive planting requirements of an estate's design. These women and Farrand emphasize the horticultural tradition at the foundation of the profession. From this collection of designers, my impression was that horticulture was more "women's work," with the exceptions of Manning and Jenson.

Beyond horticulture, Karson is successful in describing garden materials, landscape sequence, and local environments with architectural style and economic contexts. However, for me, the narratives of each estate's design lacked spatial and artistic interpretation, and critiques. This addition to her distilled historic analysis and coherent descriptions would offer a more complete picture and further detail the significance of these representative works.

Karson's work creates potent opportunities for future historic research and analysis. The era's intellectual atmosphere and ethos can be further examined through a critique on the advent of Beaux-Arts in landscape design and the rising debate over style. These phenomena mark a schism from Olmsted philosophy and design expression through landform. They sometimes also hide ideological foundations behind each style. For example, Platt was not concerned with site but only with his own artistic expression (60). De Forest truly believed that "natural" design did not have any spatial consequence (281). In contrast, Jenson believed that the straight lines of most European gardens were equivalent to intellectual decay (249). The resultant "dueling styles" dialogue, as represented by the Platt/de Forest and Manning/Jensen nexus, re-

veals an early and deep professional ideological division on design expression and the discussions' intellectual superficiality. Was this trend due to a lack of appreciation of divergent philosophies and aesthetic expressions? Why? This ideological journey could aid an analysis of the "spirit of place" of country place era estates, reveal more of the underpinning values of the time, and further clarify the connection to the American agrarian myth. These analyses would contribute to the understanding of landscape architecture's theoretical progression, clearly a focus of another written work.

*A Genius for Place* is not intended to be comprehensive; it is very informative. The collective stories create a significant portrait of important estate landscapes of the country place era. Its readability and short chapters make it conducive to consuming in limited timeframes. The plethora of large format photographs and other images tempt you to slow down, look and contemplate. Karson gives us plenty to think about. She reminds us in her afterword that we need the knowledge of our history to be successful in landscape preservation and its advocacy. If you are a landscape historian, interested in women designers, teach the history of landscape architecture, or just curious, I recommend that you add this book to your library.

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