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“. . . exceptionally valuable to practitioners and historians as well as general readership.”

Catherine Howett

**A World of Her Own Making:  
Katharine Smith Reynolds and the  
Landscape of Reynolda**

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press  
and Library of American Landscape History  
xv + 396 pages, 150 b/w illus. \$39.95, ISBN  
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One of these two monographs is the biography of a place, Vizcaya, in Miami, the other of a person, Katharine Smith Reynolds of Winston-Salem (1880–1924), wife of tobacco magnate R. J. Reynolds.

Her life story is treated as the mainspring of her estate plan. Beyond biography, however, and beyond the fluent exposition of Italomania in Florida and Anglophilia in North Carolina, lie two contrasting designs that demonstrate the broad philosophical and aesthetic scope of what landscape architect Norman Newton called the American “country place” movement.<sup>1</sup>

Vizcaya’s makers, including the client, Chicago industrial tycoon James Deering (1859–1925), looked backward to the Italian baroque. Reynolds, also working closely with her designers—notably architect Charles Barton Kean and landscape architect Thomas Sears, both of Philadelphia—paid homage to an idealized Anglo-American heritage and recast “Reynolda,” as she named it, as the future of the South. At Vizcaya, whose original inspiration was Villa Rezzonico on Lake Como, the team created an antique pastorate, albeit in a subtropical lagoon landscape; they set a consummate stage for personal pleasure, one unrivaled in America, and successfully fashioned an imaginary history of the site. The authors argue effectively that Vizcaya was not a laughable pastiche but a Gilded Age triumph of amalgamation and borrowed treasures, the apotheosis of the magpie’s nest. Katharine Reynolds’s mission, on the other hand, was education. Catherine Howett makes an intelligent and nuanced case for Reynolds as someone who cannily employed her Southern *bona fides* as a devout, proper, postbellum matron to place herself in modern life as a wealthy “new woman” of the industrializing New South. Until Reynolds’s death at forty-four, her insistence on scientific farming methods and adequate worker housing seemed a possible—although costly—strategy for rescuing the Piedmont’s gullied farmland and providing for the working class.

Neither place served as a national model for architectural or landscape design, although Miami’s South Beach Art Deco glamour may have gathered confidence from nearby Vizcaya, and Kean’s restrained vernacular style forecasted the retreat from flamboyance that characterized the second phase of great estate design, beginning in the 1920s. Both places survive as museums of sorts, with

renditions of their original landscapes. Both books showcase period photographs by gifted photographers: Mattie Edwards Hewitt’s muscular construction shots and her elegant procession of views of Vizcaya’s completed interiors and gardens; Thomas Sears’s limpid ruminations on the naturalistic landscape he created for Reynolda. Architectural photographer Steven Brooke’s fifty-nine color photographs of Vizcaya today bridge the gap between black-and-white archival images and John Singer Sargent’s lambent watercolors of the house and garden and his magisterial 1917 portrait of James Deering. Telling images by landscape photographer Carol Betsch update Reynolda House’s archival trove.

Architecture critic Rybczynski and landscape architect Olin divide their book in two—house first, then gardens and landscape—which initially seems a quixotic decision for the most thoroughly integrated villa program in America, but it works. Between them they reveal the story of the design/build troika: the combative, aggressively gifted *metteur en scène* Paul Chalfin (1874–1959); the gentlemanly, programmatic Beaux-Arts architect F. Burrell Hoffman (1882–1980); and Diego Suarez (1888–1974), the amateur landscape artist who, as Olin aptly describes him, was not “copying Classical architecture, but *performing it*” (195). Rybczynski offers a thumbnail biography of Deering and his artistic alter ego, Chalfin, an openly gay man who breathed comfortably in the American aesthetic atmosphere of Boston’s bohemia, especially at Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Fenway Court (where Harvard homoeroticism was as welcome as any other sexual orientation). Rybczynski identifies Gardner’s gifted amateur eclecticism and “unrelenting demand for the highest standard of execution” as the inspirations for Vizcaya, and notes as well Deering’s decision to place the house directly on Biscayne Bay, thus preserving on the ridge behind it the wild Florida hammock landscape he so valued. The arduous construction process of the house produced “a fusion of history, historicism, and historical memory” that “defies intellectual analysis,” writes Rybczynski (64). One is then

grateful that he goes on to analyze Chalfin's brilliant interiors, "sometimes not real but never fake" (91), that create "what Aline Saarinen perceptively termed 'periodicity,'" a layered meditation that, Chalfin said, became "a partial evocation of the city of Tiepolo" (91).

The heart of the book is the longest chapter, Olin's "Imagination, Design, and Construction." Olin defines the three ecological communities of the site, and then traces how formidable natural obstacles and major design and construction problems, most of which involved the surrounding waters of lagoon and bay, were transformed into assets. There are great pages on making summer out of Florida's winter (a problem vacationing Florida continues to create for itself) and fighting the salt spray while visions of Tuscany danced in the builders' heads. Deering comes off as a model client—visionary, opinionated, yet flexible, always yielding on costs and delays—and as an experienced industrialist who solved logistical problems by vertically integrating resources and production: buying properties for topsoil and boats for transport, opening quarries, building a railroad spur. A long section deals with the unique breakwater on the bay, the stone Venetian "barge" freighted with trees and sculpture, which became entwined with Deering and Chalfin's concept of the project. After assembling Vizcaya's cadre of skilled craftsmen and artists (many of whom, such as ironworker Samuel Yellin, moved from estate to estate in the period), and with a deep bow to George Sitwell's *On the Making of Gardens* (1909), Olin concludes the chapter with a search for Vizcaya's precedents, displaying his knowledge of the Italian villa in all its forms.

Howett presents Reynolds through Reynolds's aspirations as a progressive woman, fueled by Christianity and social conscience, who earnestly disavowed grandeur in favor of an idealized family and community life. Even though Reynolds was one of the few southern women able to carry out her philanthropic ideas on a grand scale, the freedoms that Deering and Chalfin and their male associates enjoyed in the same years form a painful contrast to Reynolds's progress in her "job" as a client and civic powerhouse,

burdened as she was by the births of four children in six years and her own desires to move beyond a woman's proper sphere. While the story of women coming into the workforce and balancing the demands of career and home is by now well-traversed material, Howett makes it fresh. She interestingly underlines how modern health, convenience, and new technology were easily as important to Reynolds as aesthetics. "'Light' was as important a metaphor in these decades for many Americans as it had been during . . . the Enlightenment," Howett writes, "synonymous. . . with rationality. . . . For her [Reynolds] the roar of generators, the hum of refrigerators, the pulsing of pumps, the lively ringing and buzzing that would soon fill the air were as reassuring and as beautiful as the sound of water cascading over the stone-faced spillway from her lake" (144).

On landscape and garden design influences Howett excels, perceptively linking Reynolds's ideas and Sears's Reynolda landscapes to figures as disparate as Edwin Lutyens and Jens Jensen; she offers a wide-ranging survey of English and American landscape theory and practice, from John Claudius Loudon and Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Eliot onward, and of the dozens of professional and popular publications in Reynolds's library. (Here especially, a standard bibliography to augment the ample, interesting notes seems wanting, while a chronology would have guided readers throughout the book.) Howett's astute assessment, as a Southerner, of the South's historic struggle with postbellum rage, a new identity, and segregation during Reconstruction and its aftermath nonetheless barely prepares the reader for Reynolds's decision to house black estate workers outside the staff village, without the indoor plumbing, electricity, or heat with which white workers' cottages were equipped.

Despite differences in approach, these extensive monographs on surviving great estates occupy the same spot on the continuum of scholarship about the country place era, which has moved from blanket disapproval to appreciative analysis and on to monographic study of single estates and

the professionals who built them. The difficulties of architectural preservation and adaptive reuse—as well as the fragility of gardens and their ever-changing nature, climate change (especially in regard to Vizcaya), and encroaching development (again, especially Vizcaya, threatened by apartment towers)—increase the importance of the written and photographic records of such projects, as envisioned and built. Cast in widely differing styles (Beaux-Arts baroque and American Arts and Crafts), the two projects exemplify philosophic extremes and idiosyncrasies of the great estate period. These two beautiful and accessible works, read together, are exceptionally valuable to practitioners and historians as well as a general readership.

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#### Note

1. Newton, Norman, *Design on the Land, The Development of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971).