

# Better Cities & Towns

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## A Modern Arcadia

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A Modern Arcadia: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the Plan for Forest Hills Gardens By Susan L. Klaus University of Massachusetts Press in association with the Library of American Landscape History, 2002, 208 pp., \$39.95 In his 1988 book *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939*, Harvard landscape historian John R. Stilgoe went out of his way to malign Forest Hills Gardens. He claimed, with scant evidence, that there were “social problems implicit in the arrangement of houses and the juxtaposition of house types.” Fortunately, scholar Susan L. Klaus has now produced a book that shows that 1909 expression of Garden City movement in a more trustworthy light. No one who walks through the arch at Forest Hills Gardens and sees the gorgeous, coordinated scene of houses and landscape fails to be impressed. Financed by the Russell Sage Foundation and laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. with Grosvenor Atterbury as chief architect, Forest Hills Gardens remains a stunning achievement – a place where New Yorkers love to live despite its distance from Manhattan. Klaus explains how that demonstration project in middle-class residential development came about, on land the foundation purchased at the high price of \$6,000 an acre (\$100,000 an acre in current dollars). The foundation lost \$360,800 on its investment, and Forest Hills Gardens failed to influence American development nearly as much as its backers hoped. Yet it has much to teach us. “That this community, now nearing its one-hundredth anniversary, remains visually distinctive, has changed so little, and continues to suit new generations of residents, is perhaps the truest testament to the talent and foresight of its creators and the quality and flexibility of its original plan and design,” Klaus writes. Forest Hills Gardens is, in her words, “another world, one that is quiet, green, and serene.” P.L.

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