
Reviewed by Lake Douglas, ASLA

Many professionals will recall Norman Newton’s definitive Design on the Land (1971) as perhaps the only history discussing 20th-century American landscape architecture. Writing from personal knowledge of the period, Newton is generally credited both for coining the term “Country Place Era” and for identifying its leading professionals, such as “Mrs. Farrand,” Marian Coffin, Warren Manning, Charles Platt, and Jens Jensen.

Robin Karon, Affiliate ASLA, and other scholars, dissatisfied with Newton’s limited account (he neglects Ellen Shipman, Lockwood de Forest Jr., and Fletcher Steele), began investigations of the generations beyond Olmsted, and, from the mid-1980s, works appeared on Farrand, Shipman, and Steele, among others.

Into this realm comes Karon’s latest work, formidable in scope and impressive in presentation. In the preface she states her purpose is “to provide an explanation of a complex and interesting phenomenon that has not been well understood—to make vivid this time, these places, and these ideas...and in so doing, to provide useful context to the stewards of these landscapes....”

Karon divides her subjects into three main chronological themes subdivided into chapters covering seven projects and eight designers’ biographies. Part I, “An American Style, 1900–1919,” discusses Manning, Platt, and Shipman together with projects such as Gwinn and Stan Hymer Hall. Part II, “Innovation and Wildness, 1920–1929,” features investigations of Farrand and Dumbarton Oaks (Washington, D.C.); Coffin and Winterthur (Delaware); and Jensen and the Ford House (Michigan). Part III, “Dreams and Abstractions, 1929–1939,” examines de Forest and Val Verde (California) and Steele and Naumkeag (Massachusetts). Karon’s engaging text sometimes includes wonderful details, such as noting that Val Verde was “peopled with a dazzling assortment of nude figures, only some of whom were...statistics.” Since much of what’s here has been previously investigated (and by Karon herself, no less), one might wonder about redundancies; instead, I noticed that biographical essays sometimes stop short of covering subjects’ entire lives, although brief information follows in project chapters.

Throughout are period images, archival plans, and new photography by Carol Betsch, all in rich duotone. Betsch’s elegant images, recalling period archival work, make a major contribution. Often they get graphic priority, floating individually with generous margins on full-page spreads. This is not the case, however, with other images (notably archival plans) that could have reinforced text, added meaning, and provided equal visual impact.

Altogether, text, visuals, and format work to produce a significant and beautiful book. Building on past scholarship and pointing the way for future investigations, Karon’s work contributes significantly to the profession’s history and our understanding of its evolution. Landscape historians will devour what’s here; others should find inspiration in planting schemes, design details, scale relationships, and photography. This is a feast to be savored and digested slowly, over time.

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