

A sepia-toned photograph of a dense forest. The scene is filled with tall, slender trees, their trunks and branches creating a complex web of lines against a lighter, hazy background. In the lower right foreground, a stone balustrade with decorative balusters runs across the frame. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and low-lying vegetation. The overall atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

A GENIUS FOR PLACE  
AMERICAN LANDSCAPES  
*of the* COUNTRY PLACE ERA

# A GENIUS FOR PLACE

## AMERICAN LANDSCAPES

### of the COUNTRY PLACE ERA

In the early twentieth century, new fortunes made it possible for many Americans to commission country estates. Wealthy industrialists could work in town and, thanks to new rail and road systems, escape deteriorating urban centers to enjoy healthy air and breathtaking scenery, even at the end of each day. During the summer months, entire households were relocated to country places. The combination of money, land, clients, and the emergence of a new profession—landscape architecture—gave rise to ambitious landscape designs across the country. Many of them were original, vital, and artistically expressive. Taken as a whole, they comprise an important, virtually unexamined art movement. Seven such landscapes are the subject of *A Genius for Place*.

American residential design in the years before the Country Place Era (1895–1942) was shaped largely by the ideas of Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852) and Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903). Both designed home grounds in a romantic style derived from literature and painting, but both also responded to the natural setting and the deep, almost mythic “spirit of the place”: the *genius loci*.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, wealthy Americans began to develop more Eurocentric tastes, particularly after the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, where Olmsted and Daniel Burnham’s Beaux-Arts plan made a strong impression on 22 million visitors. Inspired by the fair’s layout, by fashionable grand tours of Europe, and by new magazines and books (such as Charles A. Platt’s *Italian Gardens*), many patrons demanded imagery from England, France, and Italy for their new country homes. Architects and landscape architects also became interested in the richness of European design and in the Beaux-Arts idea that formal landscapes could be developed as extensions of architecture. Biltmore, c. 1895, the palatial country estate of George W. Vanderbilt in Asheville, North Carolina (and Olmsted’s final work), was a transitional design; it encompassed his traditional aesthetic as well as a new emphasis on formality.

In the years after Olmsted’s death, strong stylistic polarities divided the field. For the most thoughtful landscape designers of the new generation, the question of how to balance art and nature became a central, enlivening challenge. Talented landscape architects, such as those featured in this exhibition, successfully merged energetic artistic explorations with a respect for the *genius loci*. Other influences soon came to shape increasingly distinctive American landscape designs, too.

In the 1920s, after the writings of Sigmund Freud became widely known, designers such as Fletcher Steele realized that private landscapes could not only satisfy clients’ day-to-day needs but express their personalities, and even their unconscious dreams. Steele and his colleagues saw these dreams emerge gradually, during decades-long, sometimes passionate collaborations. Fantasy settings also reflected clients’ collections and hobbies; “souvenir” landscape passages were re-created as reminiscences of travel; gardens were designed to serve as backdrops for musical and dramatic performances, even films. Some designers explored contemporary developments in painting, sculpture, and music for ideas. Others, such as Warren Manning and Danish-born Jens Jensen, focused on ecological concerns and fought for land conservation through their clients’ business networks.

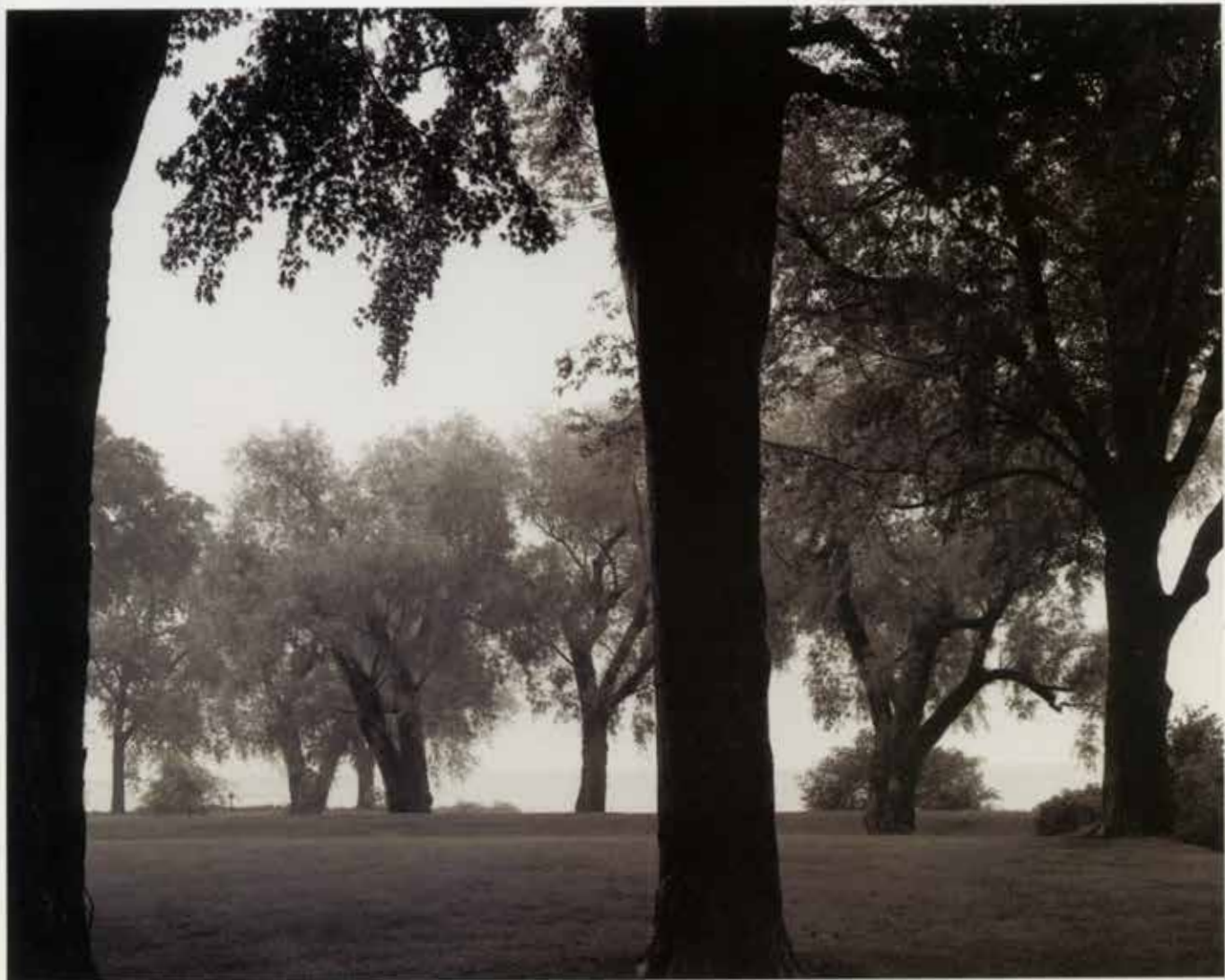
As fortunes shrank during the Depression, the market for American country places diminished. When the United States entered World War II in 1941, private construction ceased altogether. After the war, taste, lifestyles, travel, and land use patterns changed dramatically, and the unique set of cultural and intellectual circumstances that had given birth to the Country Place Era dissipated. Since that time, most of the era’s estates have disappeared, too, developed for housing or commercial use. The seven landscapes featured in this exhibition do survive, however, and are now open to visitors. *A Genius for Place* was organized to educate wide audiences about the artistic and cultural value of these rare landscapes and to encourage conscientious stewardship of them and other important American landscape designs.

RIGHT:  
*Gunn*  
Cleveland, Ohio  
(William Gwinn Mather)  
Design by Charles Platt and  
Warren Manning, 1907.

BELOW LEFT:  
*Dumbarton Oaks*  
Washington, D.C.  
(Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss)  
Design by Beatrix Farrand, 1922.

BELOW RIGHT:  
*Stan Hywet*  
Akron, Ohio  
(Frank and Gertrude Seiberling)  
Design by Warren Manning, 1916.





ABOVE:

*Edsel & Eleanor Ford House*  
Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan  
(Edsel and Eleanor Ford)  
Design by Jens Jensen, 1928.



LEFT:

*Naumkeag*  
Stockbridge, Massachusetts  
(Mabel Choate)  
Design by Fletcher Steele, 1934.



LALH:  
Vol Verde  
Santa Barbara, California  
(Wright S. Ludington)  
Design by Lockwood de Forest, c. 1935.

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

*A Genius for Place* was created by Robin Karson, a landscape historian, and Carol Betsch, a landscape photographer. Karson selected the seven sites featured in the exhibition, and together she and Betsch reflected on their history and the ideas motivating their landscape designs. Betsch's photographs are intended to illuminate the designers' intentions and express the spirit of each place.

The book *A Genius for Place* by Robin Karson, with photographs by Carol Betsch, will be published by University of Massachusetts Press in association with LALH, Fall 2007.

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