Ye Olde Borough of Queens

Just a few blocks off Queens Boulevard in Queens lies a time warp. With its medieval-English-style red-tile roofs, turrets, dormers and Tudor half-timbering, Forest Hills Gardens is virtually unchanged from its original 1909 design by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. as a “suburban town built on business principles.” Olmsted, son of the landscape architect who designed Central Park and many of the nation’s great urban parks, was the most visible member of the new profession of city planning. The 142-acre development was designed down to the door-knobs as a profit-making venture. Olmsted’s partner, the architect Grosvenor Atterbury, developed an innovative system of prefabricated concrete construction, so that a new house could go up every nine days. “The subtle variety in materials gave the village an instant patina and helped create the illusion that it had evolved over a period of years,” Susan L. Klaus, an independent scholar, writes in A MODERN ARCADIA: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the Plan for Forest Hills Gardens (University of Massachusetts, $39.95). The landscaping is delightful in color, texture and scent: in one park, spring blooms of dogwood, cherry, spirea and forsythia are succeeded by snowballs, Indian currant and honeysuckle in the summer. Klaus has a strong feel for the period architecture and especially landscaping, but does not think through less cozy implications for urban planning, like the fact that Forest Hills Gardens intended to exclude Jews, blacks and working-class people, or the preference of many Americans for ersatz historical towns like Disney’s Celebration, Fla., over the realities of city life.

ERIC P. NASH