

### Midwestern Landscape Architecture

Edited by William H. Tishler

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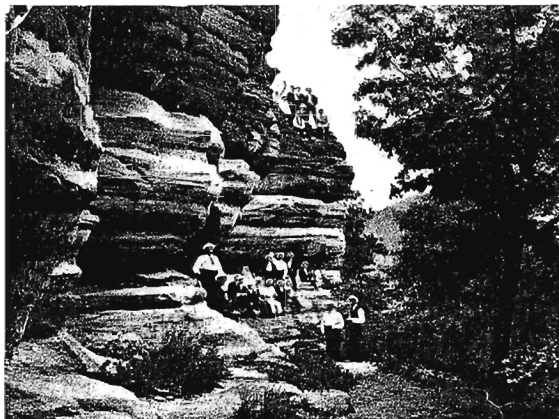
### Reviewed by Malcolm Cairns

History texts have tended to record the development of landscape architecture topically, chronologically, or biographically. The influence of land and culture on the design of landscapes is an alternative textual theme, but one that is seldom fully developed. If regionalism in landscape architecture is given any attention, however, one region seems assured of mention—the Midwestern United States and its association with the Prairie Style or School of design. Even here, historians often associate one regional landform (grasslands) with the evolution of design (often in Chicago) by several landscape architects (notably, Jens Jensen and O. C. Simonds).

The essays in *Midwestern Landscape Architecture* were all originally presented as papers at a semiannual conference organized by William H. Tishler of the University of Wisconsin and held at the Clearing, Jens Jensen's school overlooking Ellison Bay in Door County, Wisconsin. Tishler, as editor, has organized the anthology in a chronological order related to the general time of practice of the individual profiled in each chapter. The book begins with Noël Vernon's discussion of the work of Adolph Strauch at Cincinnati's Spring Grove Cemetery in the 1850s and 1860s and concludes with the Beaux Arts and Modernist work of Annette Hoyt Flanders and the mid-twentieth-century conservation efforts of Genevieve Gillette.

Expertly written and extremely well illustrated and referenced, each essay is an informative story in its own right. Several of the chapters pair designers and places: Adolph Strauch and Cincinnati; H.W.S. Cleveland and Chicago; Warren Manning and Minneapolis. The efforts of Jensen and Wilhelm Miller as conservationists and as advocates of regional identity prove illuminating. The Chicago work of both Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., and the Olmsted Brothers is also profiled, the work of the latter significant in the development of the neighborhood park and playground movement as an instrument of social

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A postcard of Starved Rock State Park on the Illinois River. For Wilhelm Miller, the striated use of rock was characteristic of the Prairie Style landscape design which Jens Jensen used in many of his council rings. One in Springfield, Illinois, is shown below.



reform. Readers might study this book before visiting the cities of the Midwest.

Tishler's essay about Cleveland reveals a man chagrined that an early plan for a Chicago boulevard would be a "drive simply made to wobble from one side to the other," characterizing the dilemma of landscape design in a flat country. Rather than simply importing a landscape style more suitable to topographically diverse Eastern landscapes, Cleveland favored a more forthright statement about Chicago's flatness and the order which the grid of section lines provided. Reuben Rainey relates that William LeBaron Jenney used the flatness of some of Chicago's parks both as monumental expressions of Louis Charles Mary's "papier quadrille" building plans taught at the Ecole Centrale des Arts and Manufactures in Paris and as blank slates from which land could be sculpted. The essays reveal additional

aspects of regionalism in the unique applications of large-scale landscape architecture to control rampant urban growth of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Midwestern cities. The urban design efforts of the Olmsteds, Cleveland, George Kessler, and Elbert Peets have provided a unique regional imprint of landscape architecture at the urban and suburban scale. Christopher Vernon's chapter about Wilhelm Miller provides additional insight into the development of a Midwestern aesthetic. The love of countryside, native plants, and the native landscape expressed in Miller's writing can be seen as a catalyst which drew attention to this regionalist view.

The profiles contained in the book do not, however, merely suggest a provincial expression of form isolated from other influences. Noël Vernon develops the connection of Puckler Musgou with Strauch, Reuben Rainey that of

Jenney with Haussmann and Alphand. Robert Grese reviews the influence that Danish folk schools had on Jensen, and Arnold Alanen develops the historic context for Peets and the revival of Renaissance town planning.

Neither are these landscapes only Midwestern examples of better known Eastern landscape designs. In many cases the regional work epitomizes national phenomena. Olmsted's design for the suburb of Riverside was the first of its kind and a precursor for a century of designs to follow. The Chicago park and boulevard system predates Boston's Emerald Necklace by almost 20 years. Kessler's promotion of the City Beautiful through the planning and design of citywide park and boulevard plans for Kansas City, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Omaha, and countless other smaller cities of the region is without equal. Other essays chronicle the impact that women practitioners had on the development of landscape architecture in the region, as exemplified by Miriam Rutz's review of the courageous efforts of Genevieve Gillette to create a state park system for Michigan.

The chapters suffer to some degree from a lack of connection. Several authors review similar backgrounds. Some connect their subjects with others in the book, but these connections do not appear to be editorially directed. Bridges between people are often mentioned, but do not comprise a consistent editorial thread. Nevertheless, the informed reader will be able to infer connections from one essay to the next, and the essays are accompanied by substantial lists of additional reading.

Many would say that the landscapes of the region do not distinguish themselves by visual extreme or drama; however, they have often served to inspire a distinctive design response. Julia Bacharach, quoting Ossian Simonds, captures the sentiments of these Midwestern practitioners: "I loved the open spaces that had been cleared for farms—the spaces that allowed us to see the sky, the clouds, the sunrises and sunsets. I loved the rolling country that allowed us to look across valleys to interesting forest skylines and foliage covered borders." ■

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