
Books

A section for the review of books is a regular feature of *Landscape Journal*. The opinions and ideas expressed in the reviews are those of the reviewers and do not necessarily depict the views of the Journal's editors or the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture.

Suggestions for books to be reviewed are always welcome, as are comments regarding the reviews published. All correspondence should be sent to the Book Review editor:

Donna L Erickson, Book Review Editor
Landscape Architecture Program
School of Natural Resources and Environment
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1115
e-mail: dle@umich.edu

MIDWESTERN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

edited by William H. Tishler. Urbana:
University of Illinois Press, 2000. ix +
256 pages, photographs, \$37.50,
clothbound.

ISBN 0-252-02593-8

Reviewed by Heidi Hohmann

Sandwiched between the tradition of the East Coast and the innovation of the West Coast, the Midwest has long been considered physical and intellectual flyover country. This is certainly true in landscape architectural practice and history. Although most practitioners can cite a raft of significant projects, both current and historic, hailing from either coast, ask those practitioners to name a groundbreaking project in the Midwest, and they go silent. *Midwestern Landscape Architecture* takes on the ambitious task of changing these parochial perceptions, hoping to "foster a better understanding of the origins of landscape architecture in the American Midwest and the contributions this profession has made to the interaction of people with their environment in the region" (p. 2).

To a large extent *Midwestern Landscape Architecture* succeeds in this endeavor, compiling in a single volume an immense amount of information on largely undocumented designers. Thirteen chapters each describe the life and work of a land-

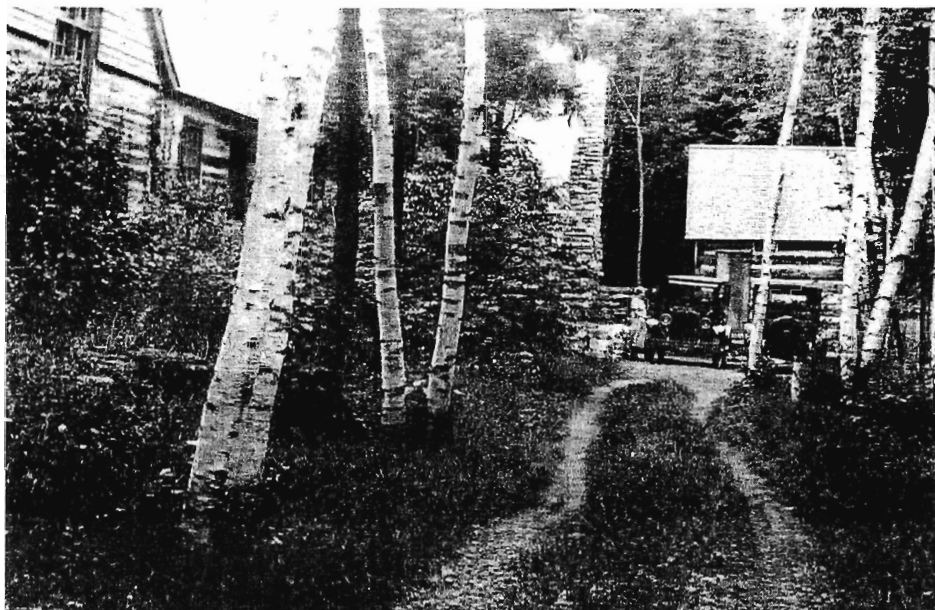
scape architect who practiced in the Midwest. Written by a talented cast of landscape scholars, the chapters are well researched, well documented, and well written. Highly readable, *Midwestern Landscape Architecture* will be a useful reference for students and, with its many pages of detailed footnotes, for future researchers.

For landscape architectural history buffs, the book is a veritable feast. New facts about little known designs and designers are illuminated on almost every page. Miriam Rutz paints a bright and powerful portrait of the virtually unknown Genevieve Gillette, who advanced from an early position as Jens Jensen's secretary to become one of Michigan's foremost parks advocates. Arnold Alanen brings Ohio-born Elbert Peets out of Werner Hegemann's shadow with an exposition of Peets's design for Greendale, Wisconsin. And it is a relief to see that Kurt Culbertson has finally brought to light a significant text on the often-overlooked work of George Kessler. Perhaps best of all is Christopher Vernon's wonderful piece of scholarship on horticulturist and writer Wilhelm Miller. This chapter not only documents Miller as a charismatic salesman preaching an inspirational doctrine of Midwestern landscape design, but also explicates the origins and meanings of the terms "Prairie Style," "Prairie Spirit,"

and "Prairie School." Vernon's definitive explication of these terms should help discontinue their use as a blanket description of midwestern regional design.

Other chapters present critical reassessments of Midwestern work by better-known designers. These chapters do less to define midwestern landscape architecture than they do to chart its origins at the national level. Reuben Rainey places William Le Baron Jenney's Central Park in Chicago squarely in the tradition of an eastern, "Olmstedian concept of an urban park" (p. 66). His evaluation is backed up by terrific analytical drawings. Victoria Ranney's assessment of Olmsted's Chicago work also clarifies that "Olmsted's vision was not so much regional as national" (p. 55). Yet her deft re-evaluation of Olmsted's use of water as an expression of the region's abundant water resources is a new twist on earlier interpretations of Olmsted in the Midwest. Lance Neckar similarly revisits the work of Warren Manning. Like Ranney, Neckar clearly has no illusions that Manning was a Midwestern landscape architect, stating that he "never adopted a comprehensive regional design aesthetic" (p. 151). Instead, Neckar argues that Manning's midwestern work was an incubator for his ideas about a progressive, resource-based landscape architecture, ideas he would later apply at a national scale.

In the midst of all this insight, there are also a few clinkers. William



The Clearing. Photograph courtesy of William Tishler.

Tippets's chapter on the Olmsted brothers wanders from the Midwestern task at hand, dissolving into an unenlightening comparison of formal and informal design in Chicago parks. And by wrapping up with Pamela Filzen's chapter on Annette Hoyt Flanders, the book ends with an unfortunate whimper. Although it is as well researched as any other chapter, and although the brief hints of Flanders's Modernist work are intriguing, Flanders's predominantly residential designs are less innovative and influential than the public work featured in other chapters. Were it not for Rutz's dynamic chapter on Gillette and Kurt Culbertson's short yet striking description of Eda Sutermeister in Kessler's office, readers might simply write this chapter off as gender-based tokenism.

But these are minor faults in an exemplary collection. What is disappointing about *Midwestern Landscape Architecture* is that the book remains a collection. The chapters, despite their chronological arrangement, exist as disconnected research efforts. It is true that many of the same places—Chicago's Humboldt Park, for example—appear in multiple chapters. But the book does not address the issues raised by the juxtaposition of the thirteen essays—issues

such as how Jenney's and Jensen's works interact in Humboldt Park, why Cleveland's and Kessler's Midwestern designs are similar, or whether designers educated in the East designed differently than those educated in the Midwest. Because such issues are never examined, the whole of the book never becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

The blame for this shortcoming lies with the introduction. Instead of examining the conceptual linkages between chapters, the introduction rehashes old history, dwelling on a poetic but worn-out development of the "Prairie Style" by O.C. Simonds, Jensen, and Miller. What a missed opportunity, given the rest of the book's fresh content. How much more insightful it would have been to speak of changing viewpoints about the prairie, to contrast Olmsted's 1868 description of the Midwest as "low, flat, miry and forlorn" with Miller's 1912 description of it as "the runway of the winds and ideas," and to speculate on the reasons for these changing perspectives (pp. 47, 182). Tishler might have considered the Midwest as the practice ground for

the "insider" and the "outsider," to compare the work of designers who practiced in the Midwest but lived elsewhere, with those who were born in or adopted the prairie as their home, or to ask some hard questions about the assumptions this book makes, such as, What really is "Midwestern landscape architecture?" How does a designer become a "Midwestern landscape architect?" Is regionalism, however compelling, a valid lens for explicating landscape architectural history?

These unasked questions mar an otherwise transcendent effort. And they point out a disturbing trend in landscape history, where assemblage masquerades as historiography. The source of this trend is obvious and understandable. Confronted with an appalling lack of baseline information in landscape history, the field has rushed to amass a body of knowledge and make it public. This instinct has resulted in a decade of useful, encyclopedic books like *American Landscape Architecture* (Tishler 1989), *The Architecture of Western Gardens* (Mosser and Teyssot 1991), and the more recent *Pioneers of American Landscape Design* (Birnbau and Karson 2000). This instinct has also created inventories of historic landscapes and produced catalogs of landscape records, efforts to capture and record historic information before it vanishes. The work encompassed in these labors is important and should not be demeaned. But it is not the only work.

History can't just be collected; it needs to be constructed. To truly build a landscape architectural history (let alone a midwestern landscape architectural history) landscape scholars need to ask, and begin to answer, the larger questions. The field must seek out the conceptual glue that sticks building-block research together. If scholars do not initiate this inquiry, landscape architecture has no history—it has only vignettes.

Landscape history is no longer in its infancy. The field cannot continue to discover data while ignoring the broader questions that define the overall discipline. Otherwise landscape history, not the Midwest, will be flyover country.

Heidi Hohmann is Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at Iowa State University in Ames.