

landscape architecture

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LANDSCAPE INTO PRINT

Robin Karson's Library of American Landscape History produces informative and readable books on practitioners of the past. *By Susan Hines*

Robin Karson and her dog, Ruby, relax in Karson's Amherst, Massachusetts, garden.



SHARED WISDOM

NOBODY IS GOING TO MAKE a movie titled *My Landscape Architect*—not anytime soon at least. Whatever you think of Nathaniel Kahn's 2003 film exploring his emotionally distant father and the famous buildings he designed, the attention it attracted had more to do with Louis Kahn's starchitect status than with the younger Kahn's oedipal fixation.

Nobody is going to make *My Landscape Architect* because, as Betsy Barlow Rogers, Honorary ASLA, noted in a 2006 interview with *Landscape Architecture*, the profession overall hasn't yet attracted enough attention and support from the general public. Frederick Law Olmsted, people know. When it comes to Fletcher Steele or Warren Manning, well, not so much.

Robin Karson, executive director of the Library of American Landscape History (LALH), wants to change that. Like Rogers, Karson is not a landscape architect, but she has worked for more than a decade to raise awareness of the profession and some of its lesser-known practitioners through her nonprofit publishing project. Now in its 15th year, Karson's membership organization generates new books and exhibitions about North American landscape history in addition to republishing forgotten classics in the field.

These are not just any books. LALH editions are meticulously edited and lavishly illustrated and, most important of all, interesting to read. Each volume in the ASLA Cen-

ennial Reprint Series is accompanied by a significant scholarly introduction that offers new insights into the work or biographies of the authors. And a decade before the Museum of Modern Art's *Groundswell* exhibit, LALH was creating and deploying traveling exhibitions highlighting the work of Ellen Biddle Shipman and other prominent landscape designers.

What sparks Karson's interest in landscape history and how has she succeeded in writing and publishing her own well-received books about landscape history while enabling and encouraging others to do the same?

I TOOK A TRIP TO NAUMKEAG [Steele's master work in Stockbridge, Massachusetts] in the early 1980s, and I was blown away," Karson says. "I had no idea what this place was or why or when it had been made. But I could see immediately it was a designed landscape." Because she was trained as an art historian, Karson recognized the garden for what it was—a work of art.

When she happened upon the estate, which Steele worked on over the course of three decades, Karson had a master's degree in the history of art and museum practice from the University of Michigan under her belt, but she was steering herself away from museum work and toward writing. Why? "I decided I wasn't suited to keeping track of 'things,'" she admits readily. "In the end, objects were not that interesting to me." Instead Naumkeag in particular and landscape in general became her new passion.

Already a freelance contributor to *Art in America*, Karson drew upon her skills as a historian and aimed her reportorial instincts at Naumkeag. "Everybody knew the house was designed by Stanford White, but at the time it was difficult to get information about who designed the gardens." When Karson showed up at the Library of Congress (LOC) to look at Steele's papers in the manuscript division, she learned she was the first scholar to delve into the collection.

At both the LOC and the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Environmental Science & Forestry (ESF) in Syracuse, Karson discovered "incredible layers of thought and ideas" in Steele's papers and correspondence. "It was an amazing entry into the world [of landscape architecture]. Yet, even landscape architects said to me, 'Why are you bothering? Fletcher Steele? He never did anything.'"

At this point, Karson was still freelancing while pursuing her interest in Naumkeag on the side. Her day job had taken a more landscape architectural bent, and she was producing articles on a variety of subjects for both *Garden Design* and *Landscape Architecture*. Then, armed with a \$10,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant, which, she points out, "you applied for in those days," she began writing what would become *Fletcher Steele, Landscape Architect: An Account of the Gardener's Life, 1885–1971*, which was published by Sagapress in 1989 and revised and reissued by LALH in 2003.

Numerous reviews from publications such as *Landscape Journal* and *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* not only testified to the meticulous research behind the

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book but also praised its engaging narrative. In 1990, *Fletcher Steele* captured an ASLA Honor Award in the communications category. Now the long-overlooked landscape architect was back on the map, a historic figure to be reckoned with, and widely considered to be an essential link between 19th-century Beaux-Arts formalism and modern landscape design.

Despite these kudos, Karson says, "The most exciting thing was the effect at Naumkeag—there was more interest and more resources. And [my research] provided this much more complete framework for making preservation decisions. You can't preserve a landscape the way you can a painting or even a house or a piece of music. If you understand the principles behind the design, you are in a much better position to preserve.

"Just the idea of how works of art survive over time became really interesting to me," she goes on to explain. "Landscape is the most complex, challenging, and expensive to preserve. Time, use, architecture—all these changing dynamics and elements need to be brought into some new equilibrium. If all you understand is superficial—this tree there—you are often going to fail because conditions change.

"I didn't discover this in a vacuum," she points out. "I was coming to it at a time other people were beginning to think about identical issues. People like Patricia O'Donnell [FASLA] were thinking about preservation theory, for example. You need practitioners as well as people to do research that answers the historical questions. And I also realized you need to bring people along, to interest the general public so they will really support these landscapes. What better way to do that than to build a publishing program that produces high-quality scholarship that engages readers?"

Excited by her success drawing attention to Steele's landscapes and legacy, Karson founded LALH in March 1992 to develop books about American landscape history in collaboration with Sagapress, a respected trade publisher in the new field. When Sagapress folded a few years into the arrangement, Karson says the nonprofit was temporarily "orphaned." Still, it seemed LALH would be better matched with a university press whose scholarly goals and pace were more aligned with its own. The University of Massachusetts Press in Amherst seemed a good fit, given its strengths in American history, culture,

women's studies, and previous books by J. B. Jackson, Ann Leighton, and others.

As an associate publisher with the University of Massachusetts, Karson says, "LALH helps support the publication of landscape histories by paying authors to develop books, by finding really good editors, and by having [the books] indexed—a huge help to researchers. We also hire designers and pay for photographs. By the time the book gets to press, there is already a huge investment—much greater than usual university press books."

Early on, Karson established the tenor and format of LALH projects. With *The Muses of Gwinn: Art and Nature in a Garden Designed by Warren H. Manning, Charles A. Platt, and Ellen Biddle Shipman*, Karson succeeded in crafting an approach that would serve other authors in the program well: a thoroughly researched monograph on a single site. "The idea of focusing on a single place or a single person was a good one," she admits. "And again, the book proved helpful to the people at Gwinn in the decisions they make every day."

With another ASLA Honor Award under her belt for *The Muses of Gwinn*, Karson expanded the purview of LALH publications even further with the ASLA Centennial Reprint Series. "I had this idea we should also be reprinting classics—books that were becoming hard to find—and publish them with substantial introductions of 50 or so pages." ASLA endorses the series but is not a sponsor.

With just three more volumes left to go, the reprint series already offers seven classics, including *Landscape Architecture, as Applied to the Wants of the West* (1873) by

The Manning Research Project *LALH needs you.*

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT Warren Henry Manning (1860–1938) was one of the most influential practitioners in the profession's nascent years. A horticulturist, landscape architect, town and city planner, and author, Manning was mentored by Frederick Law Olmsted and was a founding member of ASLA. His 50-year career resulted in more than 1,700 diverse projects all over the country. Hundreds of these properties still survive.

LALH is working toward the publication of a two-volume biography and history of his work.

The project is now in the research phase, which consists of conducting site surveys for the 1,700 projects on Manning's client list, using a survey form LALH has developed. LALH is soliciting help from qualified local volunteers all over the country to do these surveys. The projects include every conceivable landscape type: small home lots, private estates, golf courses, parks, subdivisions, company towns, and regional plans among them.

Research volunteers will be credited in the database for their site research and in citations of that research used by authors in the book, as well as for research assistance in both volumes of the book.

Mackenzie Greer, Student ASLA, coordinates the Warren Manning Research Project at LALH. This is a collaborative online effort. Learn more about the project and how to participate by visiting www.lalh.org or e-mailing mgreer@lalh.org.



H. W. S. Cleveland and O. C. Simonds's *Landscape-Gardening* (1920). The most popular by far is John Nolen's *New Towns for Old* (1927), which was out of print for a long time. "It's a huge seller," Karson says. "Nolen was the original New Urbanist."

In the case of the ASLA Centennial Reprint Series, Karson says, "We develop and edit new introductions and then supply vintage copies of the books and illustrations, and the press takes responsibility for design and production."

Like LALH's new books, the reprints have proven useful to preservationists. The Nolen book has aided preservationists in the Nolen-designed communities of Venice, Florida, and Wilmington, Delaware's Union Park Gardens neighborhood. Similarly, a reprint of O. C. Simonds's *Landscape-Gardening* helped preserve Simonds's Riverview Park in Hannibal, Missouri, and eventually landed the site a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Karson also felt that LALH should produce an encyclopedic reference work on landscape architects and related professionals. Published by McGraw Hill in 2000, *Pioneers of Landscape Design* was coedited by Karson and Charles Birnbaum, FASLA. LALH, The Cultural Landscape Foundation, the National Park Service, and other organizations supported an effort that filled an enormous void in any major reference collection. Although it is now out of print, Karson hopes to bring the original edition back.

Meanwhile, LALH continues to produce new works of landscape history as well. How do they find authors and identify worthy topics? "It happens in a variety of ways," Karson says. In the case of Katharine Reynolds, her granddaughter approached LALH about developing a book on the estate her grandmother owned with her husband, tobacco kingpin R. J. Reynolds, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

LALH engaged landscape architect Catherine Howett, FASLA, professor emerita at the University of Georgia's School of Environmental Design, to write the book, which was 10 years in

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the making and was supported by donations from the Reynolds family. *A World of Her Own Making: Katharine Smith Reynolds and the Landscape of Reynolda*, was reviewed in *Landscape Architecture's* November issue.

"Part of my job is to find money through grants and through membership in LALH at various levels," Karson says. "Our income breakdown varies somewhat from year to year; however, approximately 60 percent comes from individual donations, 30 percent is in the form of grants from foundations and organizations, and 10 percent is generated from royalties and exhibition fees."

Karson runs a lean organization. She is the only full-time employee. A part-time office manager and a part-time director of educational outreach help keep the operation flowing—the web site is updated regularly and an annual illustrated newsletter, *VIEW*, is mailed free of charge to thousands of individuals and organizations in North America.

The touring exhibitions that LALH sends out to the world tap another resource, Karson says: "the idea of a museum as a forum for teaching people about visual things."

The first exhibit LALH created is on view at SUNY ESF in Syracuse. "That exhibit [on Fletcher Steele] has been shown at 15 to 20 venues. That's tens of thousands of people who have seen the exhibit," she says excitedly. Many of these people would not read the book, but they will go to an exhibit. Exhibitions are also available on Shipman and Gwinn. "I wish we could do an exhibition for every book," Karson says.

A more recent and slightly different museum effort is the exhibit *A Genius for Place*, on which Karson teamed with landscape photographer Carol Betsch. "Using old photographs, second generation photographs, made it very difficult to get into traditional museums. We really positioned this exhibit as original art. It was great that museums [like the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film] saw the quality of the work and hosted it because of both that and the interesting subject matter."

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Meanwhile Karson's book of the same title has been issued just this month. Broader in scope than her previous efforts, this profusely illustrated work traces the development of a distinctly American style of landscape design be-

tween the 1890s and the 1930s, from Warren Manning to Lockwood de Forest Jr. Chapters alternate between the practitioners and the places they created. "These people were sailing on the wings of Olmsted, but they were able to integrate a variety of influences into an essentially American design," Karson says of the book, adding, "To see responses to place developing an increasingly modern sensibility is incredible."

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WHAT SUBJECTS DOES KARSON SEE as fodder for future LALH publications?

"I think a historical study of institutional landscapes would be very useful because it seems like we are all going to end up in them in one way or another!" she says with a laugh. "But there were extraordinary aspects to asylums and sanitariums and college campuses that are now so woefully missing from institutions where healing and education are supposed to take place. And practitioners today are really trying to learn what aids in healing."

Although she has concentrated on more formal landscapes of the era, Karson quickly identifies the Depression as a rich vein to be mined by historians of public landscapes. "I think the 1930s is a fascinating period of landscape design—very transitional. The Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and state power all became sources of work. There is a lot of regional design to be explored."

Road design is another area that demands attention from scholars. "Amazing parkways were built, first as carriage roads, then as small parkways, and eventually extending in scale to national park roads," she says. "Again, it seems most of the roads that are created now are designed with such a lack of understanding of design principles." In other words, the past, a forgotten past at least, isn't prologue.

"Studying the past is critical to any endeavor," Karson maintains. "It doesn't come just from reading books; it comes from studying places and from travel. But I would love to see more books of the sort that landscape architects want to read: history that is written to be exciting and inspiring and exhibitions filled with enthusiasm and ideas. Not just who did what when."

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