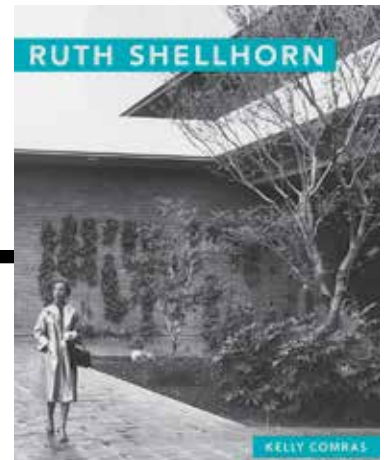


HER CALIFORNIA

RUTH SHELLHORN

BY KELLY COMRAS; ATHENS, GEORGIA: THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS IN ASSOCIATION WITH LIBRARY OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE HISTORY, 2016; 240 PAGES, \$26.95.

REVIEWED BY SONJA DÜMPELMANN



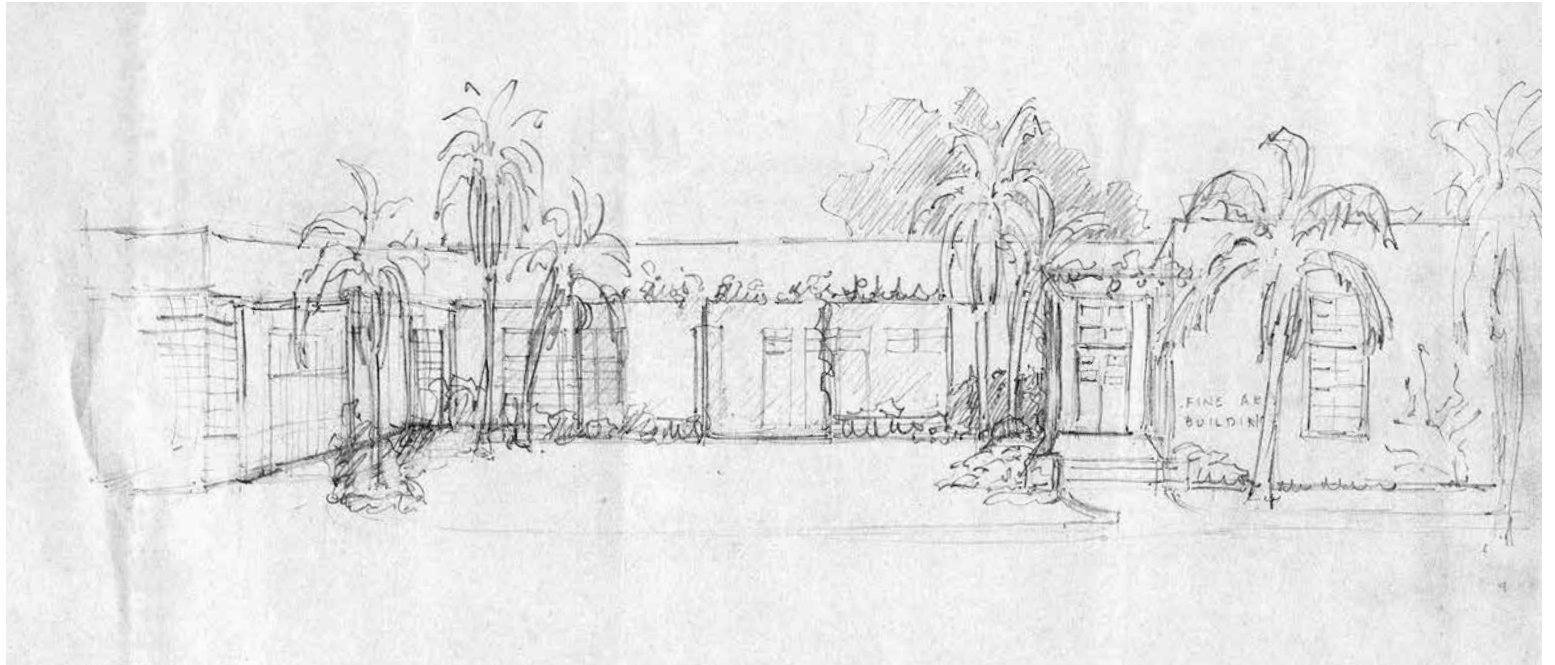
This neat and richly illustrated book offers the reader a concise introduction to Ruth Shellhorn, an important but so far largely overlooked American landscape architect. *Ruth Shellhorn* is the first book-length account of this woman's life and work, providing a descriptive account of her career and 12 selected designs. Shellhorn contributed to shaping the commercial, public, and private Southern California landscape through designs that unconsciously codified what has been described as “the California style.” Born into a well-to-do California family in 1909, she designed some 400 landscapes in her home state during a career that spanned nearly six decades until her death in 2006.

Kelly Comras, ASLA, introduces Shellhorn as a figure of transition between tradition and modernism who excelled in planting design and who, during the Depression, established her own practice as one of the second-generation pioneering female landscape architects in California, succeeding Beatrix Farrand, Katherine Bashford, and her own next-door neighbor, Florence Yoch. An overview of Shellhorn's career is followed by 12 chronologically ordered case studies that show the breadth and depth of her work in the private and public realm, on small and large scales.

Having begun her studies in the School of Landscape Architecture at Oregon State Agricultural College before transferring to Cornell University, Shellhorn—whose professional aspira-

tions were supported by both her parents and her neighbor, Yoch—never completed a degree. Yet, once she returned to Los Angeles, she managed to set up a small practice, forge alliances with some of the region's architects, and finally, through the acclaim of her designs, achieve the recognition that would bring her commissions from many wealthy property owners, including some Hollywood film stars. Comras paints a refreshing picture of a landscape designer with great personal integrity who was deeply and ingeniously dedicated to her profession but who, in contrast to some of her male Californian colleagues like Thomas Church, Garrett Eckbo, and Lawrence Halprin, was rather reserved and shy about publicizing her own work. Rather than identifying with a particular style or seeking to define her own, Shellhorn developed site-specific designs on the basis of sensitive site analyses and the users' and clients' desires, always seeking to instill “a sense of physical well-being” in her landscapes. She was no friend of the “egoism characterizing much of modern design” and “disapproved of experimental landscape designs and modernist exercises devoid of site or client.”

While this may be one of the reasons Shellhorn's work has stood in the shadow of her male California peers for so long, the case studies Comras has selected reveal a design sensitivity that easily stands on par with their work. Shellhorn developed her most complex and intricately subtle designs for the gardens of some of



IN SHOPPING CENTER PARKING LOTS, SHELLHORN MADE PARK LANDSCAPES THAT PEOPLE SOUGHT OUT EVEN AFTER STORE HOURS.

her private clients—for example, the Pasadena sculpture garden of Alexander and Adelaide Hixon—but her landscapes for Disneyland and Bullock’s Pasadena department store and Fashion Square shopping centers are perhaps the most interesting in terms of their program, history, and cultural and social context.

In 1946, through her earlier work on the Los Angeles Shoreline Development Study, Shellhorn was brought on board the design and planning team for Bullock’s department store in Pasadena. She quickly became the lead landscape architect. Using drought-tolerant yet “tropical-looking” plant species, some of which took tree scouts almost a year to locate, she designed a landscape that enveloped the suburban department store and turned it into a parklike oasis. Her 1950s and 1960s projects for Bullock’s Fashion Square shopping centers in Santa Ana, Sherman Oaks, Torrance, and La Habra took this landscape development even further, tackling what became an ever-increasing land use at the time: parking lots. She created park landscapes that people would seek out during, but also outside of, store hours. If rural cemeteries were used by 19th-century urbanites as the first public urban parks, Shellhorn’s Fashion Square landscapes became similar spaces for 20th-century suburbanites who lacked public parks in their

immediate living environments. Her landscapes inspired shoppers to re-create similar planting designs in their home gardens. Ultimately they also won her the American Association of Nurserymen’s National Industrial Landscaping Award, conferred in 1966 by Lady Bird Johnson.

A decade earlier, Shellhorn was called to tackle some difficult landscape design questions at Disneyland. While the different immersive landscapes of the park needed to convey a distinct character, they also had to merge into a coherent whole. Designing more in the field than at the drawing board, she worked alongside Disney’s art directors to develop a comprehensive pedestrian plan for the park, planting details for the front entrance, and a planting scheme for the central Plaza Hub. The latter design diminished the sense of an oversized space, created more intimate areas for restful retreats, and connected the dissimilar dusty western frontier landscape with a tropical jungle, a childhood fantasy landscape, and a glimpse into the future.

Shellhorn came to these projects through connections with the architects in charge, with whom she had collaborated on earlier projects and who in some cases also became mentors.

ABOVE
A 1936 pencil sketch of the Fine Arts building of South Pasadena High School. The landscape design for the school—from which she’d graduated in 1927—was Shellhorn’s first public commission.

COURTESY KELLY COMRAS



LEFT
Bullock's Pasadena landscapes were guided by the department store owner's request that "nothing 'Eastern' looking" be used.

Early in her career she took every opportunity that was given to her, publishing articles in magazines and collaborating on projects with already established architects and landscape architects. But she wavered on accepting the repeated offers of the landscape architect Ralph Dalton Cornell to partner with him. This decision ultimately paid off when she began to receive commissions for Bullock's department stores, which enabled her to stake out her path to full independence. Serving as the president of California's ASLA chapter from 1946 to 1948 probably also helped her in this process. As Comras shows in this book, Shellhorn worked on a variety of different projects that included campus designs, regional plans, and urban planning projects, as well as commercial landscapes and private house gardens. She was one of the few landscape architects who despite being on her own (with the later support of her husband) in the decades after the Second World War managed to work on projects that went beyond the residential scale. She was also often able to work alongside architects, developing the landscape while the buildings were being designed. The better known she became, the more influence she could bring to the larger site design and architectural decisions as well.

Comras's introduction to Shellhorn reveals familiar traits of pioneering female landscape architects. Like many of her leading female peers, during her early career she published articles in journals and profited from the mentoring, encouragement, and generosity of many male professionals; she assumed leadership positions and stood her ground directing construction work. Like many women of her generation, she received acclaim in particular for her planting designs. In fact, as portrayed by Comras—a landscape architect practicing in Southern California—Shellhorn's use of plants was among the defining characteristics of her landscapes.

Shellhorn never publicly admitted that her gender may have made things more difficult for her. Like many of her female peers she seized the opportunities that the Second World War offered women when men were serving in the war. But Shellhorn's partnership with Harry A. Kueser—who was 11 years her senior, and whom she married at 31—was unconventional. After he had left his job as a midlevel bank manager at the Bank of America, Kueser began to supervise the construction work of her projects. He also supported her by taking on the practice's accounting work and becoming a draftsman. Although she had already established herself by the time Kueser decided to quit his job, the couple's business model allowed Shellhorn to take on larger commissions and concentrate on the creative part of her work.

Thus, *Ruth Shellhorn* also makes a valuable contribution to the female record in landscape architecture, adding a rare type of business model to the ones often used by women in the profession. While the book is a first foray into Shellhorn's



Southern California career and a fine compilation of new materials, it lacks broader relevant insights. This is largely owing to its descriptive nature and the lack of further analysis, interpretation, and contextualization—something that a more scholarly account and investigation can offer. Rather than being taken as a critique, however, this comment should be read as an encouragement. There is much opportunity for further work on Shellhorn, postwar urban and suburban landscape design, and the history of landscapes in general.

One may ask further, then, what exactly the regional aesthetic that is so often invoked in this volume implied. What exactly made up the “California Atmosphere,” and how did Shellhorn develop it? How did it correspond with the work of regionalist architects in the area? Were there any further ideological implications of this aesthetic? For Shellhorn, the “California Atmosphere” was “contemporary, yet reminiscent of an earlier, quieter, more romantic era.” But what nostalgia and romanticism were implied in this comment? What were Shellhorn’s personal goals when working on the suburban commercial landscapes

of Bullock’s department stores and shopping centers? Was she really empowering and satisfying the desires of housewives by creating homey environments that promoted spending, as she seems to have believed? How did Shellhorn “set the standard for the shopping mall of future generations,” as the book suggests? It suffices to say that many of today’s malls look very different and only seem to encourage the empowerment of retailers’ global capitalist aspirations.

To be clear, though diligently researched, this small volume (an easy and light read) does not intend to be a scholarly account of Shellhorn’s life and work. Rather, it is an introduction to this important designer’s oeuvre. It is also the first of the new Masters of Modern Landscape Design series organized by the Library of American Landscape History. The format recalls the earlier Landscape Design Trust monograph series promoted by the British Landscape Institute on some European landscape designers—including Geoffrey Jellicoe, Peter Shephard, and Sylvia Crowe. But in contrast to the British series of four edited volumes that include different voices and perspectives on one designer, this first volume of the Masters of Modern Landscape Design series offers a more compact and concise single-author account of Shellhorn. As much as it comes as a relief to see that books on landscape



ABOVE
Shellhorn visited as work continued on the Sleeping Beauty Castle six weeks before Disneyland’s opening day on June 6, 1955.

RIGHT
In 1950, a glass screen protected the Knapp Garden patio from canyon winds.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HARRY KUESER. COURTESY RSP. TOP, PHOTOGRAPH BY RUTH SHELLHORN. COURTESY KELLY COMRAS. BOTTOM

CAREERS SUCH AS SHELLHORN'S NEED TO BE ADDRESSED CRITICALLY AND CONTEXTUALIZED MORE BROADLY.

architecture can still be produced in high quality with color photographs—many of which in this case are works of art themselves, taken by notable California photographers such as Ansel Adams, Julius Shulman, and Douglas M. Simmonds—this book also offers a provocation. Providing little more than a first insight into Shellhorn's life and work and ending rather abruptly with the description of the last of the dozen case studies of her work, it shows how much we still need to do to elevate the discourse about landscape design. Further work and scholarship that critically assess Shellhorn's work, and position it more broadly into a national and even international context, can help to further substantiate, elaborate, complement, and even revise our current landscape histories.

Nevertheless, the author has provided a valuable addition to the increasing number of monographs that cover the oeuvre of 20th-century landscape architects in the United States and elsewhere. She has done so with an accessible volume that should interest professionals and garden and landscape lovers alike. We need more forays like this one that offer information on the basis of basic research. It is the nature of these types of publications that they leave us with more questions than answers. While we need to uncover people like Shellhorn in the profession, their contributions warrant analysis, reflection, and interpretation. How do landscape architects work? How do they come up with and develop designs? How are their designs built, and how are their designs received and used? A rigorous application of the art historian Michael Baxandall's "period eye" to landscape architecture, i.e., a critical investigation of the cultural, social, and political conditions under which landscape designs were created, viewed, used, and understood—and of how they are seen today—can be a path to achieve this goal.

Although Shellhorn has not gone completely unnoticed by authors, Comras needs to be credited for bringing her back to light, and also for encouraging Shellhorn to give her papers to the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA. There the papers are now kept for future scholarship and research, for which, as this volume attests, there is ample opportunity. To stop where this book ends would be detrimental to the profession, its history, and discourse. ●

SONJA DÜMPELMANN IS A LANDSCAPE HISTORIAN AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AT THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DESIGN.

BELOW
A seating area at Bullock's Fashion Square Del Amo in Torrance, California, in 1969.



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