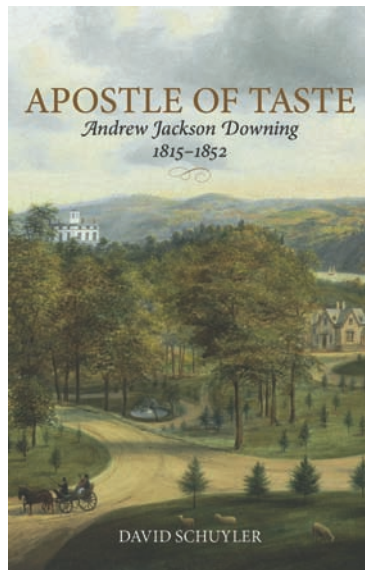


# Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815–1852

David Schuyler. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015. xxii and 290 pp., illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper (ISBN 978-1-62534-168-6).

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Why would geographers wish to read an assessment of the work of antebellum U.S. landscape gardener and architect Andrew Jackson Downing? Today we take “landscaping” for granted, and in much of the United States we hire “landscapers,” often immigrants and day laborers, to maintain for us what in the 1840s was a new and exciting vision. That vision has led to a widespread vernacular form of lawns and gardens, albeit adapted to local environmental opportunities, with houses sited back from tree-lined and often curvilinear streets. Downing, substantially through his writing and proselytizing, if not materially through commissions, shaped this vision and applied what in the nineteenth century emerged as a generic U.S. style. The style emanated from the Hudson Valley and was proffered as a naturalistic, romantic-environmentalist adaptation and simplification of European, and especially English, gothic rural landscaping and architecture. Downing’s vision challenged the strongly Georgian classical and rude geometric vernacular versions employed, if any style were employed at all, in the colonial and postrevolutionary periods. Author David Schuyler, here and in other books, has worked successfully to convey Downing’s really quite remarkable legacy as an apostle of taste, humanizing nature and naturalizing spaces as a public,

socializing benefit that shaped U.S. landscape taste in ways we still value.

Downing wanted to influence a democratic civil society through an intellectual and moral middle-class aesthetic, and design a landscape that would bring antebellum Americans across social classes together. Still today, U.S. small towns and villages, and even an occasional farmscape, exhibit nineteenth-century Downing-inspired English or Italianate-styled houses, and sometimes a classical vernacular form festooned with a gothic gable or board-and-batten siding and bracketed overhangs. Early elite watering holes, such as Newport, Rhode Island, exhibit relict mansions and gardens, likewise inspired by Downing’s vision

of taste and refinement, albeit in his simplified, American adaptation. So, too, do urban parks and suburbs that eschew the grid. Quite simply, if one wishes to read and make sense of today’s U.S. middle-class landscape, one needs to understand Downing’s vision and how well and widely it was employed. When we interpret the landscape through a remote sensing lens or build geographic information system platforms to display the landscape, or borrow from the past in planning new public spaces, we should have a sense of the historical context in which this style was developed and diffused across the country. In time it was challenged by highly bombastic Victorian styles and the subsequent return of the classical in the form of Beaux Arts structures and spaces exemplified in the Progressive Era’s City Beautiful movement. All were intended in some fashion to promote social order and civilize a postpioneer U.S. landscape desolated by high mobility and rapid settlement—a hubris too often exhibited by planners and designers, I would argue. In Downing’s case, however, the vision stuck; it worked to democratize landscape taste nationally and across classes, most

generally in suburban design, and it stays with us, even in subtle forms, far more than its successor styles have done.

Schuyler's approach is to assess the impact of Downing's philosophy and vision, and the immediate and lasting effects of his published writings and drawings, especially given his short life—he died in 1852 at age thirty-six in a steamboat accident on the Hudson River. Downing's father owned an ornamental and fruit tree nursery in Newburgh, New York, where the young Downing learned practical horticulture, which he combined with scientific study and architectural drawing to shape a career. By his early twenties, he was an accomplished horticulturalist inspired to tame and domesticate the unruly landscape of the pioneer phase of settlement in the eastern United States, all of which gave him early access to social respectability with clients wealthy enough to commission designs and plantings from him. As with many of his generation living out of immediate memory of the American Revolution, he became enamored of things English. He designed his own domestic space of house and garden inspired by drawings of English cottages and villas and with a view of the Hudson River—all to model an aesthetic statement and the efficacy of his want to humanize nature and build a sense of place. From this setting he spent the remaining dozen years of his life drawing, writing, corresponding, and editing works that shaped the next generation of domestic architecture and landscape gardening designs on the land, most immediately for social elites in the eastern United States but simplified in form in middle-class expression across the country as well.

Downing's most significant writings and drawings were compiled in books and journals. His initial fame as the preeminent U.S. authority on landscape gardening and rural architecture came from *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (Downing 1841, and later editions), the best-selling and most widely influential book on landscape gardening and rural architecture published in the nineteenth century. Part of the romantic-environmental scientific discourse of the time, here focused on cultural expression in tree breeding and picturesque design for siting houses and gardens, its purpose was humanistic, educational, and commercial. With an emphasis on challenging the dominant Grecian forms of the period, Downing sold over the next decade a good many naturalistic house drawings and garden designs, as well as fruit and ornamental trees from the family nursery. More, though, this and subsequent work established Downing as the leading proponent of a worldview essentially conservative and patriotic, stable and permanent, and even

antiurban, all in the face of the rapidly changing, increasingly industrializing antebellum United States.

Despite starting in landscape gardening and horticulture, and with his growing fame, he developed a keen interest in house design as a means to improve U.S. taste in general, commissioning superb architectural drafter and illustrator Alexander Jackson Davis, not to be confused with Downing himself, as essential collaborator in promoting the picturesque. Together they produced *Cottage Residences* (Downing 1842), to promote further their theory of design for a newly prosperous and growing middle class, including how to update and redesign older, classical house forms. Although not a builder's guide, drawings were sufficient for a good builder to follow, and they introduced such elements as running water and water closets. The book led to some smart commissions, including for public buildings, and like its precursor, it sold well and was updated and reprinted many times in the succeeding decades. *Fruits and Fruit Trees in America* (Downing 1845) was a more scientific work leading to lively exchanges with horticulturalists in other regions of the United States about what soil and climate conditions were appropriate, and adding scientific legitimacy to Downing's commercial work. It also further introduced him to Europeans, many of whom when traveling to the United States made a point of visiting him in Newburgh to share interests and ideas, all to enhance the promotional value of designs.

In 1846, Downing assumed editorship of the *Horticulturalist*, a kind of utilitarian *Life Magazine* of antebellum rural America, where he found a large and growing audience with which to communicate in both literary and scientific terms on a regular schedule. He used the journal quite explicitly to promote his reformist program to improve the postpioneer landscape, including into the Middle West, through the articles and illustrations he selected and through his own editor's perch. Having read Tocqueville, and ever conscious that the greatest impact on improving the landscape would come from the middle class, he especially promoted modest dwellings, such as rural gothic cottages and simple and economical board-and-batten farm houses, even as he continued to design villas for elites. He incorporated concerns for gendered uses of domestic environments, for soil conservation, and against exotic plant intruders, all in his effort at reforming rural life. He promoted scientific farming and agricultural education to strengthen the economy and society of the countryside, and his wide readership absorbed the message.

By the end of the 1840s, Downing had moved from adapting European architectural styles to promoting a truly

American architecture reflective of an emerging national identity and character. Articulated most effectively in *The Architecture of Country Houses* (Downing 1850) with drawings by Davis, Downing's take was that good houses were an important means and symbol of civilization, they brought great social value by nurturing families, and they produced moral force in shaping middle-class character. In time, Downing's highly romantic, naturalizing landscaping gave way to more commercial utility, but he anticipated design of the commuter suburb and criticized early gridiron village plans along commuter railroads, and no doubt he influenced Davis's design of Llewellyn Park, New Jersey. My own well-treed, century-old neighborhood in Baltimore City that mixes Tudor and Tuscan revivals albeit with pseudo-Georgian forms reflects Downing's suburban vision, in contrast as it is with older Baltimore neighborhoods with gridded streets of row houses with marble stoops.

Downing was an important member of the American Renaissance in philosophy, literature, and science of the antebellum period, but far more than, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau, he left an indelible mark on the U.S. landscape, a republican vernacular legacy from tree planting to house forms to parks to generations of suburbs. To move fully into architectural commission work after 1850, Downing found a partner in a young English architect, Calvert Vaux. Yet within two years, Downing was dead, and it fell to Vaux to carry on the Downing vision in villas and mansions, in public gardens, and in urban parks, all for the edification of Americans.

A full flowering of that vision emerged when Vaux partnered with Frederick Law Olmsted, most notably in New York's Central Park, where they explicitly acknowledged Downing's contribution to their work.

Schuyler's finely illustrated, high-quality work, timed for the bicentennial of Downing's birth, reproduces an original publication of George Thompson's *Creating the North American Landscape Series* at Johns Hopkins University Press (Schuyler 1996). Schuyler, professor of American Studies at Franklin and Marshall College, offers a new preface (and should have updated the bibliographic essay), but otherwise the work replicates the first edition. For those unfamiliar with Downing's legacy and Schuyler's considerable work on nineteenth-century landscape design, *Apostle of Taste* is worth the read.

## References

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